

PERSIAN LETTERS

VOL. I.



MONTESQUIEU

1811

PERSIAN LETTERS
MONTESQUIEU

TRANSLATED

BY

JOHN DAVIDSON
VOL. I.

LONDON

GIBBINGS & COMPANY

LIMITED

1899

CONTENTS

	PAGE
TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION	xiii
SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE PERSIAN LETTERS	1
INTRODUCTION, 1721	7

LETTER I

USBEK TO HIS FRIEND RUSTAN, AT ISPAHAN	11
--	----

LETTER II

USBEK TO THE CHIEF BLACK EUNUCH, AT HIS SERAGLIO IN ISPAHAN	12
--	----

LETTER III

ZACHI TO USBEK, AT TAURIS	14
-------------------------------------	----

LETTER IV

ZEPHIS TO USBEK, AT ERZEROU	17
---------------------------------------	----

LETTER V

RUSTAN TO USBEK, AT ERZEROU	18
---------------------------------------	----

LETTER VI

USBEK TO HIS FRIEND NESSIR, AT ISPAHAN	19
--	----

LETTER VII

FATME TO USBEK, AT ERZEROU	21
--------------------------------------	----

CONTENTS

	PAGE
LETTER VIII	
USBEK TO HIS FRIEND RUSTAN, AT ISPAHAN .	25
LETTER IX	
THE CHIEF EUNUCH TO IBBI, AT ERZEROUM .	27
LETTER X	
MIRZA TO HIS FRIEND USBEK, AT ERZEROUM .	35
LETTER XI	
USBEK TO MIRZA, AT ISPAHAN	36
LETTER XII	
USBEK TO THE SAME, AT ISPAHAN	42
LETTER XIII	
USBEK TO THE SAME	47
LETTER XIV	
USBEK TO THE SAME	50
LETTER XV	
THE FIRST EUNUCH TO JARON, THE BLACK EUNUCH, AT ERZEROUM	52
LETTER XVI	
USBEK TO THE MOLLAH MEHEMET ALI, GUARDIAN OF THE THREE TOMBS AT KOUM	54
LETTER XVII	
USBEK TO THE SAME	56

CONTENTS

LETTER XVIII	PAGE
MOLLAH MEHEMET ALI, SERVANT OF THE PROPHETS, TO USBEK, AT ERZEROUM . . .	58
LETTER XIX	
USBEK TO HIS FRIEND RUSTAN, AT ISPAHAN .	62
LETTER XX	
USBEK TO HIS WIFE ZACHI, AT THE SERAGLIO AT ISPAHAN	64
LETTER XXI	
USBEK TO THE CHIEF WHITE EUNUCH . . .	68
LETTER XXII	
JARON TO THE FIRST EUNUCH	70
LETTER XXIII	
USBEK TO HIS FRIEND IBBEN, AT SMYRNA . .	72
LETTER XXIV	
RICA TO IBBEN, AT SMYRNA	73
LETTER XXV	
USBEK TO IBBEN, AT SMYRNA	80
LETTER XXVI	
USBEK TO ROXANA, AT THE SERAGLIO AT ISPAHAN	81
LETTER XXVII	
USBEK TO NESSIR, AT ISPAHAN	86

CONTENTS

	PAGE
LETTER XXVIII	
RICA TO * * *	88
LETTER XXIX	
RICA TO IBBEN, AT SMYRNA	92
LETTER XXX	
RICA TO THE SAME, AT SMYRNA	97
LETTER XXXI	
RHEDI TO USBEK, AT PARIS	99
LETTER XXXII	
RICA TO * * *	100
LETTER XXXIII	
USBEK TO RHEDI, AT VENICE	101
LETTER XXXIV	
USBEK TO IBBEN, AT SMYRNA	104
LETTER XXXV	
USBEK TO GEMCHIP, HIS COUSIN, DERSVISH OF THE GLORIOUS MONASTERY OF TAURIS	107
LETTER XXXVI	
USBEK TO RHEDI, AT VENICE	110
LETTER XXXVII	
USBEK TO IBBEN, AT SMYRNA	113
LETTER XXXVIII	
RICA TO IBBEN, AT SMYRNA	116

CONTENTS

LETTER XXXIX	PAGE
HAGI IRBI TO THE JEW BEN JOSHUA, MOHAM- MEDAN PROSELYTE, AT SMYRNA . . .	120

LETTER XL	
USBK TO IBBEN, AT SMYRNA . . .	123

LETTER XLI	
THE CHIEF BLACK EUNUCH TO USBK . . .	124

LETTER XLII	
PHARAN TO USBK, HIS SOVEREIGN LORD . . .	125

LETTER XLIII	
USBK TO PHARAN, AT THE GARDENS OF FATME	127

LETTER XLIV	
USBK TO RHEDI, AT VENICE . . .	128

LIST OF
ETCHINGS BY ED. DE BEAUMONT
ENGRAVED BY E. BOILVIN
VOLUME THE FIRST

1. PORTRAIT OF MONTESQUIEU . . . *Frontispiece*
2. THE SERAGLIO . . . *To face page 14*

INTRODUCTION

I

OF all great French authors perhaps Montesquieu is the least known in this country. It is more than a hundred years since any work of his was translated into English, and no greater sign of the neglect which has befallen him could be instanced than the infrequency of the appearance of his name in our periodical and journalistic literature, at a time when our ideas of government are once more in the crucible. The greater fame of Voltaire and Rousseau, and the absorbing interest of the French Revolution, are the principal causes of this neglect; at the same time, had there been anything in the shape of a true biography of Montesquieu, a living picture of the man, the operation of these causes might have been in some degree obviated.

INTRODUCTION

It was the custom under the *ancien régime* in the great law-families for the eldest son to compose a life of his father: a document designed to hide the actual man behind a mask of the domestic and legal virtues so effectually that his friends and colleagues should be unable to recognise him. Such a *mémoire pour servir* in the highest style of the art, Montesquieu's son prepared and published in 1755. The eulogies of D'Alembert, Maupertuis, and the Chevalier de Solignac, founded, all of them, so far as they refer to Montesquieu's life, upon this filial effigy, represent only a mask with the conventional air proper to a great and good man.

This lack of a truthful picture has, of course, had a bad effect on Montesquieu's fame in France as well as in England. Least known, until recently, as regards his life, of all the great Frenchmen of the eighteenth century, he has had perhaps the most varied fortune of all writers of that or any other age. For about fifty years after his death, his reputation was unrivalled; but from 1789 till 1814, the alternations of

xiv

INTRODUCTION

feeling towards him in France were as extravagant as if he had been a living agent in the Revolution and its sequel, "now extolled to the clouds as the master of political science, as the man of genius who had rediscovered the title-deeds of the human race; now denounced as *laudator temporis acti*, the apostle of privilege, and the defender of abuses." Abandoned and condemned in evil times, he has always reappeared when France has recognised its truest interests. Under the Consulate and the First Empire he is intentionally forgotten, but in 1814 he comes to the front once more. Publishers and editors were seized about that time with a "sort of fury" for the works of Montesquieu, and from 1819 till 1834 numerous annotated editions appeared. Then again there came a period of eclipse, and it was not until the close of the Second Empire that France, once more free, resumed the study of him who first tried to show it what freedom meant.

In 1875 M. Edouard Laboulaye's edition of Montesquieu's works, perhaps the best,

INTRODUCTION

was published in seven volumes; and in 1878 M. Louis Vian issued his "*Histoire de Montesquieu*," the most important work on Montesquieu that has yet appeared. M. Vian had access to much unpublished matter; and his book, which is the result of fifteen years of study and research, supplies that biography for want of which Montesquieu's personality has hitherto been as vague as a spectre. In short, they seem at last in France in a fair way to get something like the true focus of Montesquieu, to have him placed in his proper niche: to understand him, even to label him, for he is not one of the very greatest whom it is criminal, and indeed impossible, to docket and define until one can look at them through the thought of many generations.

It is from M. Vian's biography that the material for this introduction is mainly drawn. The writer is also indebted to M. Albert Sorel's monograph on Montesquieu, and to the prefaces of M. Laboulaye. For the translation, the editions used were those of M. Laboulaye and M. Tourneux, the text of the former having been followed

INTRODUCTION

as a rule: the notes in both have been found very serviceable.

II

Like Montaigne, Montesquieu was a Gascon. His father, Jacques de Secondat, married Marie-Françoise de Penel, the descendant of an English family which had remained in France after the English rule had ceased there. She was an only child, and her husband received with her the title and barony of La Brède, an estate in Gascony, with a fantastic old Gothic donjon built in the thirteenth century. Montesquieu was the second of six children. The date of his birth is not known, but he was baptized on the 18th of January, 1689. His godfather, like the godfathers of Montaigne in 1553, of the lord of Beauvais in 1644, and of the Comte de Buffon in 1742, was a beggar belonging to the district, chosen "in order that his godchild might remember all his life that the poor are his brothers." He was christened

INTRODUCTION

Charles-Louis, and bore, according to a curious custom of the time, the surname of De la Brède, the patronymic, De Secondat, being reserved for the head of the house.

His nurse was a miller's wife, and the first three years of his life were spent with her. Most of those who have written of Montesquieu have attributed his constant use of the Gascon accent, and of certain idioms and solecisms, to these three years. Is it likely, if he had not heard the Gascon accent in his father's household, and probably from his father's lips, that the effect of his lisping in a *patois* in his earliest infancy would have remained with him all his life? If, however, he heard nothing in his father's house but the best "French of Paris," his close and lasting friendship with his foster-brother, Jean Demarennès, is a sufficient cause for the perpetuation of his Gasconisms. But the point is of small moment.

Montesquieu's mother died when he was seven years old, and four years after, in 1700, he was sent to the college of the Oratorian Fathers at Juilly, near Meaux,

INTRODUCTION

in the department of Seine-et-Marne. There he remained till 1711. He was docile and diligent, and the solid foundation laid in Juilly enabled him to become the best informed writer of his time in France. In the year in which he left Juilly he wrote his first non-scholastic piece—the first, at least, of which we know anything. It was a refutation, in the form of a letter, of the doctrine of the eternal damnation of idolaters: the substance of it he afterwards incorporated in the “Persian Letters.”¹

III

On leaving college Montesquieu began to study law. It was natural, as both his grandfathers had been presidents of the Parliament of Guienne, and his uncle occupied a similar position. Methodical in all things, he studied jurisprudence according to a plan of his own, the draft of which still exists; and found plenty of time to frequent the best salons of Bordeaux, in

¹ Letter XXXV.

INTRODUCTION

which the rank of his family and his own reputation as a young man of talent secured him a welcome. The chief figure in Bordeaux society at that time was the Duke of Berwick,¹ the son of James II. and Marlborough's sister. This careful soldier and upright man, the only cool-headed and thoroughly sensible scion of the House of Stuart, perceived the merit of Montesquieu, and a friendship sprang up between them which ended only with the Duke's death. Montesquieu cherished his memory, and among his papers was found a warm and eloquent eulogy of the victor of Almanza.

In 1713 Montesquieu's father died, and his uncle, the Baron de Montesquieu, took upon himself the duties of guardian. Two months after his nephew had reached his twenty-fifth year, he caused him to be appointed a lay-councillor of the Parliament of Guienne; and a year later, on the 30th of April 1715, Montesquieu married the girl of his uncle's choice, the Demoiselle Jeanne Lartigue, a plain-looking Calvinist,

¹ Governor of Guienne, 1716-1719.

INTRODUCTION

inclined to limp,¹ but frank, good-natured, and with a dowry of a hundred thousand livres. Love had nothing to do with marriage: Montesquieu's wife was his house-keeper, and the mother of his heir.

In the beginning of 1716 his uncle died, leaving him sole legatee on condition that he should call himself Montesquieu. Besides the name, which he had already adopted on the day of his marriage, he inherited a house in Bordeaux, lands in Agénois, and the position of *President à mortier* in the Parliament of Guienne. His installation took place in July, 1716, and he retained his presidentship till 1728.

Of the twelve provincial parliaments of France, that of Guienne, which sat at Bordeaux, ranked third with regard to the extent of its jurisdiction. It was directed by six *presidents à mortier*,² and as it possessed political, religious, administrative, and judicial attributes, the proper perfor-

¹ See p. 7.

² So called because they wore a cap of the shape of a mortar, made of black velvet, ornamented with a gold band.

INTRODUCTION

mance of the duties of a president entailed considerable study, and were in themselves by no means light. Montesquieu is believed to have given them sufficient attention, although on his own showing,¹ he did not understand legal procedure; but no trace remains of his judicial functions.

His official duties did not by any means occupy him exclusively. After the Academies of Caen and Paris, that of Bordeaux, having been established in 1712, is the most ancient. Three years after its constitution, Montesquieu was admitted, and became one of its most enthusiastic members. Wherever he was, and in whatever he might be engaged, he had always time to attend to its interests. More than once in acknowledgment of his many services he was appointed president. Much of the work he prepared for the Academy has been lost; of the dissertation which was considered the most remarkable, only the title remains—"The Religious Policy of the Romans." Medicine, physics, natural history, were all studied, and numerous discourses written.

¹ "Pensées."

INTRODUCTION

The effect of these studies is to be found throughout all his works, the principal definitions in "L'Esprit des Lois" itself being, not those of a lawyer or metaphysician, but rather of a geometer and naturalist.

IV

In all likelihood the idea of the "Persian Letters" occurred to Montesquieu before he left college. The first of them, dated the 21st of the moon of Muharram (January), 1711, was written in his twenty-second year; the last in his thirty-second. Reflections of his favourite reading are to be found in their framework, and critics have pointed out many resemblances to Dufresney's "Amusements," "The Turkish Spy," "The Spectator," the "Decameron," with borrowings from Erasmus and other less-known writers. But Montesquieu has at least spoiled nothing that he has used. The "Letters" were printed in Amsterdam, and published anonymously in 1721; and at once, as a friend of Montesquieu's had

INTRODUCTION

predicted, "they sold like loaves." No French writer had ever before said so perfectly what all felt and were trying to say; and it was done so skilfully, so pleasantly, like a man telling a story after supper.

At the time they appeared the social order of the *ancien régime* was beginning to crumble about the monarchy. The revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, by exiling the Huguenots, had deprived the country of many of its most industrious subjects, and struck a disastrous blow at its trade; the power of France, built up peacefully by Mazarin and Colbert, had been shattered at Ramilies and Malplaquet; and Louis XIV.'s acceptance of the Bull *Unigenitus*, directed against the Jansenists, had destroyed the last remnant of religious liberty. As for the parliaments, they were only able to mumble and grumble, endless edicts having pulled their teeth, as it were, one by one; and the condition of the people was desperate in the extreme. It is no wonder that when Louis XIV. died, the middle and lower classes thanked God with

INTRODUCTION

“scandalous frankness” as for a long-expected and certain deliverance: The upper classes were delighted also, although they hardly returned thanks in the same quarter, nor for the same relief. It was not a lightening of taxation, some liberty of conscience, more equal laws, that the latter anticipated, but the old licence, the “unchained libertinage,” the idea of which had never disappeared, but had been handed down, as Sainte-Beuve says, in direct and uninterrupted descent from the Renaissance to the Fronde, from the Fronde to the Regency, through De Retz, Saint-Evremond, Vendome, Bayle, to the Epicureans, Pyrrhonists, professors of an imperturbable impiety, the unbelievers, as full and certain in their unbelief as Bossuet was in his faith, who made a byword of the eight years from the death of Louis XIV. to his successor’s assumption of power. Grown sanctimonious in his old age, Louis XIV. had made his subjects hypocrites. At his death the boast of vice succeeded to ostentatious devotion; the court like one man changed from Tartuffe into Don Juan. All things were discussed,

INTRODUCTION

examined, and torn to shreds. The intestine quarrels of the Church gave scoffers the opportunity they would have made. Dubois debauched politics; Law, finance; and the populace debauched themselves : for gaming, which had before been confined to people of quality, became the common amusement. Incest, too, was quite *à la mode* ; and those who could not be in the height of the fashion had to be satisfied with lesser vices. The autocratic rule of the *Grand Monarque* gave place to the *laissez-aller* of Philip of Orleans, the "unbelieving Regent." Hope, desire, speculation, knew no bounds, all things in heaven above and in the earth beneath having become common and unclean. It is this period that is reflected and criticised in the "Persian Letters."

V

The "Persian Letters" are the correspondence of several Persians, on a visit to Europe, with each other and their friends in Ispahan. Rica, the younger of the two

INTRODUCTION

principal writers, is good-humoured, sarcastic, and represents the lighter side of Montesquieu's nature. His lively intellect makes him a keen observer; his youth and health enable him to go everywhere, see everybody, and experience everything. He describes the surface of society with a quick glance that sometimes pierces deep enough, too. The King of France, although he has no mines of gold and silver, like the King of Spain, is much wealthier, deriving supplies from an inexhaustible source, the vanity of his subjects. He is likewise a magician, for his dominion extends to the minds of his subjects. If he has a costly war on hand, and is short of money, he simply suggests that a piece of paper is a coin of the realm, and his people are straightway convinced of it. But this is a small matter. There is a much more powerful magician, the Pope, to wit, who sometimes makes the King believe that three are no more than one; that the bread he eats is not bread, and the wine he drinks not wine. It is Rica who makes the discovery that the Christian religion practically

INTRODUCTION

consists in the non-fulfilment of an immense number of tedious duties ; and it is he who quotes the epitaph on the diner-out, which recalls by its numerical exactness Teufelsdröck's epitaph on Philippus Zaehdarm. "Here," it runs, "rests one who never rested before. He assisted at five hundred and thirty funerals. He made merry at the births of two thousand six hundred and eighty children. He wished his friends joy, always varying the phrase, upon pensions amounting to two millions six hundred thousand livres ; in town he walked nine thousand six hundred furlongs, in the country thirty-six furlongs. His conversation was pleasing ; he had a ready-made stock of three hundred and sixty-five stories ; he was acquainted also from his youth with a hundred and eighteen apophthegms derived from the ancients, which he employed on special occasions. He died at last in the sixtieth year of his age. I say no more, stranger ; for how could I ever have done telling you all that he did and all that he saw."¹ It is Rica who

¹ Letter LXXXVIII.

INTRODUCTION

sketches the alchemist in his garret, praying fatuously that God would enable him to make a good use of his wealth ; the people whose conversation is a mirror which reflects only their own impertinent faces ; the professional wits planning a conversation of an hour's length to consist entirely of *bons-mots* ; the compilers who produce masterpieces by shifting the books in a library from one shelf to another ; the universal "decider," who knew more about Ispahan than his Persian interlocutor ; the French Academy, a body with forty heads, all of them chokeful of tropes, metaphors, and antitheses ; the geometer, a martyr to his own accuracy, who was offended by a witty remark, as weak eyes are annoyed by too strong a light ; the quidnuncs, *petits-maîtres*, lazy magistrates, financiers, bankrupts, and opera-dancers.

Usbek is older, graver, given to meditation and reflection. Although from his earliest youth a courtier, he has remained uncorrupted. As he could not flatter, his sincerity made him enemies, and brought upon him the jealousy of the ministers.

INTRODUCTION

His life being in danger, he forsook the court, and retired to his country-house. Even there persecution followed him, and he determined on the journey to Europe. Rica went as his companion.

The opening paragraph of Letter XLVIII., in which Usbek characterises himself, is undoubtedly descriptive of Montesquieu. "Although I am not employed in any business of importance, I am yet constantly occupied. I spend my time observing, and at night I write down what I have noticed, what I have seen, what I have heard during the day. I am interested in everything, astonished at everything: I am like a child, whose organs, still over-sensitive, are vividly impressed by the merest trifles." Usbek can be as brilliant and satirical on occasion as his younger companion, but his aim is to probe to the heart of things, and he knows that truth will only reveal itself to a reverent search. To him all religions are worthy of respect, and their ministers also, for "God has chosen for Himself, in every corner of the earth, souls purer than the rest, whom He has separated from the



INTRODUCTION

impious world that their mortification and their fervent prayers may suspend His wrath." He thinks that the surest way to please God is to obey the laws of society, and to do our duty towards men. Every religion assumes that God loves men, since He establishes a religion for their happiness; and since He loves men we are certain of pleasing Him in loving them, too. Usbek's prayer in Letter XLVI. is not yet out of date. "Lord, I do not understand any of those discussions that are carried on without end regarding Thee: I would serve Thee according to Thy will; but each man whom I consult would have me serve Thee according to his." He insists that religion is intended for man's happiness; and that, in order to love it and fulfil its behests, it is not necessary to hate and persecute those who are opposed to our beliefs—not necessary even to attempt to convert them. Indeed, he holds that variety of belief is beneficial to a state. A new sect is always the surest means of correcting the abuses of an old faith; and those who profess tolerated creeds usually

INTRODUCTION

prove more useful to their country than those who profess the established religion, because, being excluded from all honours, their endeavour to distinguish themselves by becoming wealthy improves trade and commerce. Proselytism, with its intolerance, its affliction of the consciences of others, its wars and inquisitions, is an epidemic disease which the Jews caught from the Egyptians, and which passed from them to the Christians and Mohammedans, a capricious mood which can be compared only to a total eclipse of human reason. "He who would have me change my religion is led to that, without doubt, because he would not change his own, although force were employed; and yet he finds it strange that I will not do a thing which he himself will not do, perhaps for the empire of the world."¹ Usbek is a sophist, but it is quite evident that he is no bigot; he even goes further than Montesquieu himself, a wit of the Regency, felt to be right; and when he praises suicide as being no more a disturbance of the order of Providence

¹ Letter LXXXVI.

INTRODUCTION

than the making a round stone square, he is rapped over the knuckles with the reminder that the preservation of the union of body and soul is the chief sign of submission to the decrees of the Creator.

Usbek has his character-sketches as well as Rica. He gives a lively description of those geniuses who frequent the coffee-houses, and on quitting them believe themselves four times wittier than when they entered. The savage king sitting on his block of wood, dressed in his own skin, and inquiring of the sailors if they talked much of him in France, is an illustration of his. One letter, the forty-eighth, is quite a picture-gallery. Usbek is in the country at the house of a man of some note; and he describes to his friend Rhedi various members of the company he meets. There are vulgar farmers-general who brag of their cooks; jaunty confessors, necessities of female existence, who can cure a headache better than any medicine; poets, the grotesquest of humankind, declaring that they are born so; the old soldier, who cannot endure the thought that France has

INTRODUCTION

gained any battles without him ; and last, but not least, the lady-killer who has a talk with Usbek. “ ‘It is fine weather,’ he said. ‘Will you take a turn with me in the garden?’ I replied as civilly as I could, and we went out together. ‘I have come to the country,’ said he, ‘to please the mistress of the house, with whom I am not on the worst of terms. There is a certain woman in the world who will be rather out of humour ; but what can one do ? I visit the finest women in Paris ; but I do not confine my attentions to one ; they have plenty to do to look after me, for, between you and me, I am a sad dog.’ ‘In that case, sir,’ said I, ‘you doubtless have some office or employment which prevents you from waiting on them more assiduously ?’ ‘No, sir ; I have no other business than to provoke husbands, and drive fathers mad ; I delight in alarming a woman who thinks me hers, and in bringing her within an ace of losing me. A set of us young fellows divide up Paris among us in this pursuit, and keep it wondering at everything we do.’ ‘From what I under-

INTRODUCTION

stand,' said I, 'you make more stir than the most valorous warrior, and are more regarded than a grave magistrate. If you were in Persia you would not enjoy all these advantages; you would be held fitter to guard our women than to please them.' The blood mounted to my face; and I believe had I gone on speaking, I could not have refrained from affronting him." Then there are casuists, great lords, men of sense and men of none, bishops, philosophers and philosophasters, all pricked off as deftly as any of Rica's acquaintances, and with less exaggeration, if with more sobriety. One brief dramatic sketch must not be omitted. Has any one failed to meet the gentleman who says, "I believe in the immortality of the soul for six months at a time; my opinions depend entirely on my bodily condition: I am a Spinozist, a Socinian, a Catholic, ungodly or devout, according to the state of my animal spirits, the quality of my digestion, the rarity or heaviness of the air I breathe, the lightness or solidity of the food I eat?"¹

¹ Letter LXXV.

INTRODUCTION

Montesquieu has distinguished the characters of Rica and Usbek with care; and during the first months of their stay in Europe, he succeeds with fair success in depicting their state of mind in the midst of, what was to them, a new world. Soon, however, they become in all except their domestic matters merely mouthpieces for the author's satire and criticism, and expounders of his theories. It is Usbek who in several letters explains those ideas which Montesquieu afterwards developed in "*L'Esprit des Lois*." On this subject he writes as a legislator, with the well-balanced judgment, the restraint and reserve which always temper Montesquieu's enthusiasm and control his expressions of opinion. Here in one sentence is the policy of "*L'Esprit des Lois*": "I have often inquired which form of government is most conformable to reason. It seems to me that the most perfect is that which obtains its object with the least friction; so that the government which leads men by following their propensities and inclinations

INTRODUCTION

is the most perfect." ¹ And in the following has been detected the philosophy of Montesquieu's great book: "Nature always works tardily, and, as it were, thriftily; her operations are never violent; even in her productions she requires temperance; she never works but by rule and measure; if she be hurried she soon falls into decline." ² In fact, the latter portion of the "Persian Letters" is edited from Montesquieu's commonplace-book. It reveals his ideas on international law, on the advancement of science, and on the origin of liberty; and states those problems which were to be the study of his life.

From the travels of Chardin and Tavernier, Montesquieu derived his knowledge of Persia. To Chardin he is particularly indebted, not only for the background, but for his theory of despotism ³ and his theory of climates.⁴ The story of the revolt of Usbek's harem, though belonging to a style long out of fashion, is skilfully told, and will be found to interest the most prudish

¹ Letter LXXXI.

² Letter CXV.

³ Letters CIII., CIV.

⁴ Letter CXXII.

INTRODUCTION

reader in spite of some disgust. The forsaken wives, and long-winded pedantic eunuchs, are all French, of course, French people of the Regency; and Usbek himself is as jealous as a *petit-maitre*. As for the story of Anais, and the sexual love of brother and sister in "Apheridon and Astarte," all that need be said of them is that they are characteristic of the mood of the Regency. The translator gave a passing thought to the propriety of omitting the former; but the author did not omit it, so it appears. One word more on this subject, and it shall be a word from Montesquieu himself. He found his daughter one day with the "Persian Letters" in her hand. "Let it alone, my child," he said. "It is a work of my youth unsuited to yours."

VI

Soon after the publication of the "Persian Letters" Montesquieu went to the capital to enjoy his reputation. There he found society more agreeable in Paris than in
xxxviii

INTRODUCTION

Versailles, because in the small world of the latter intrigue was the rule, whereas in the former people amused themselves. He became a member of the informal Club de l'Entre-sol, which met on Saturdays in the house of President Hénault. Bolingbroke was the founder of this club, and its most distinguished member. Among those who frequented it were the Abbé de Saint-Pierre, D'Argenson, "secretary to the Republic of Plato," and Ramsai. Probably the principal benefit which Montesquieu derived from his attendance at the Entre-sol was his introduction to Lord Chesterfield; but he continued a member until Cardinal Fleury interdicted the club in 1730, on account of the active part it began to take in politics.

With the aid of Mademoiselle de Clermont, Louis XIV.'s unspeakable tenth muse, Montesquieu was elected to the Academy in 1725; but his election was invalidated on account of his non-residence in Paris. He then returned to Bordeaux, sold his presidentship, acquired the necessary qualification, and, not without a questionable

INTRODUCTION

intrigue, was elected in 1728 to the chair rendered vacant by the death of De Sacy, a forgotten translator.

In the spring of the same year Montesquieu set out on his travels with a nephew of the Duke of Berwick, whose affairs called him to Vienna. It was during this journey that he applied for nomination to some diplomatic post. In urging his claim he pointed out that he was not duller than other men; that, being of independent means, honour was the only reward he sought; that he was accustomed to society, and had toiled (*beaucoup travaillé*) to make himself capable. The powers that then were, however, elected to dispense with his services.

Montesquieu was much disappointed with his reception at the hands of the great. On his first entrance into society he had been announced as a man of genius, and had been looked on favourably by people in place; but when the success of the "Persian Letters" proved that he actually had ability, and brought him the esteem of the public, people in place began to be shy of him.

INTRODUCTION

It was no consolation for him to tell himself that officialdom, secretly wounded by the reputation of a celebrated man, takes vengeance by humiliating him, and that he who can endure to hear another praised must merit much praise himself.¹ He was deeply disappointed. In his youth he had written, "Cicero, of all the ancients, is he whom I should most wish to be like." A public career was denied him and he suffered, having set his heart on it; but he was more of an ancient Roman than Cicero, if that was his ambition; and it is surely better to be famous as the author of "*L'Esprit des Lois*," than to be infamous as one of Louis XV.'s ministers.

In Italy he found Lord Chesterfield. The two men had already tested each other in the *Entre-sol*, and they were now glad to travel together. Journeying to Venice, they met Law, the creator of credit, who, having preserved his taste for speculation and a fine diamond, passed his time in staking the latter at the gaming-table. Montesquieu had dealt severely with him in the "*Persian*

¹ "*Pensées*."

INTRODUCTION

Letters," but that did not prevent Law from receiving him pleasantly ; nor did the ruined financier's complaisance prevent Montesquieu from applying the lash again in "*L'Esprit des Lois*."

From Venice they went to Rome. Montesquieu frequented the salon of Cardinal Polignac, the French ambassador; and the city, both ancient and modern, had its due effect. Before leaving it, he paid a visit to the Pope, Benedict XIII., who said to him, "My dear president, I wish you to carry away some souvenir of my friendship. To you and yours I grant permission to eat meat every day for the term of your natural lives." Montesquieu thanked the Pope and withdrew. Next day they brought him the dispensation with a note of charges. "The Pope," said Montesquieu, returning the papers, "is an honest man; I will not doubt his word; and I hope God has no reason to doubt it either." An answer becoming a shrewd economic Gascon.

After visiting Naples, Pisa, Florence, Turin, and the Rhine country, they arrived

INTRODUCTION

at the Hague, where Chesterfield was English ambassador. From the Hague they sailed to England, reaching London in November, 1729.

VII

Although Montesquieu lived in England for eighteen months, there is but little to tell of his visit. According to his custom he went everywhere, and saw, if not everybody, certainly Walpole, Pope, and Swift. Montesquieu derived immense benefit from his travels, because he was always pliant to the manners of the country in which he sojourned. "When I am in France," he said, "I swear friendship with everybody; in England, with nobody; in Italy, I do the agreeable all round; in Germany, I drink with the whole world." He found England the most useful country to visit. Germany, he thought, was made to travel in, Italy to rest in, England to think in, and France to live in.

Montesquieu left behind him a set of notes

INTRODUCTION

on England, from which we can gather and condense his impressions.

In London the people eat much flesh-meat, with the result that they become very stout, and collapse at forty or forty-five.

The streets of London are so bad, that it is advisable to make one's will before taking a hackney-coach.

The young English noblemen are divided into two classes: those who, having been to the University, have some learning, and are consequently shamefaced and constrained; and the shameless ones who know nothing, and are the *petits-maitres* of the nation. But the English in general are modest.

Paris is a handsome city where there are ugly corners; London is a villainous place containing some very beautiful things.

The complaints of foreigners, especially of the French, in London, are lamentable. They say that they cannot make a friend; and that their overtures are received as injuries. But how can Kinski, the Broglies, and La Vilette, with their profuse French

INTRODUCTION

manners, expect the English to be like them? How should the English, who do not love each other, love strangers?

I look on the King of England simply as a man who has a pretty wife, a hundred servants, a handsome equipage, and a good table. People think him fortunate; but when he is left alone, and his door closed, and he has to quarrel with his wife and his servant, and swear at his butler, he is not so much to be envied after all.

By dint of suspecting everybody, people grow hard-hearted here.

There are some Scotch members of parliament who can get only two hundred pounds for their votes, and who sell them at that price.

A minister thinks only of defeating the opposition; and to that end he would sell England—the whole world.

Extraordinary things are done in England for money. The English do not even know the meaning of honour and virtue.

I do not know what will be the upshot of European emigration to Africa and the West Indies; but I am certain that England will

INTRODUCTION

be the first nation to be deserted by its colonies.

The English make little effort at politeness, but are never impolite.

Women in England are reserved because they see little of the men. If a foreigner speaks to them, they suspect his intentions. "‘Je ne veux pas,’ disent-elles, ‘give to him encouragement.’”

There is no religion in England. If religion is spoken of everybody laughs.

England is at present the freest country in the world, not excepting any republic. I call it free, because unlimited power is in the hands of the King and the Parliament. A good English citizen will therefore endeavour to protect liberty as much against the Commons as against the King.

Montesquieu's impressions of England were written on his lands as well as in his books ; for when he returned to France he had his ancestral estate of La Brède laid out in the English style.

INTRODUCTION

VIII

The rest of Montesquieu's life was spent at his estates in the country and at Paris.

He made great improvements in his land, and increased his revenues largely. At his death his income is said to have been sixty thousand francs. He was not ambitious to be rich; but in all that he took in hand he wished to feel and to see signs of his ability. He has been accused of parsimony, but that is one of the commonest charges the weak have to bring against the strong. Order was the law of his being, and prodigality and dissipation as repugnant to him as anything else chaotic. Indeed there was always too little chaos about Montesquieu.¹ He saw life steadily and saw it whole, too soon, too easily; and he took a part for the whole. But, to return, he was certainly not avaricious. His enlightened benevolence appeared in

¹ His "tranquil chaos" was what Carlyle admired most in Tennyson.

INTRODUCTION

the moderate rents he charged; and there are several specific acts of generosity recorded.

Henry Sully, an English astronomer of note, being at Bordeaux pursuing experiments in horology, received much attention at the hands of Montesquieu, then President of the Bordeaux Academy. One day Sully, reduced to his last sou, "no uncommon thing with inventors," wrote Montesquieu a brief note, "very English and very artless"—"I am in the mood to hang myself, but I don't think I should do so if I had a hundred crowns." "I send you a hundred crowns," replied Montesquieu, "don't hang yourself, and come and see me."

In the winter of 1747-48, Guienne, on account of the war with England, had been unable to import a sufficient quantity of grain. On the 7th of December, Montesquieu, being at La Brède, was told that the tenants on an estate of his fifty leagues away were almost famine-stricken. He drove to the place at once with hardly a halt; summoned the curés of "the four
xlvi

INTRODUCTION

villages," and while waiting for them examined the state of provisions. On their arrival he said, "Gentlemen, I beg you to assist me in procuring some help for your parishioners. You know those who are in need of corn, or of money to buy it. I wish all the grain in my barns to be distributed gratuitously. My steward will hand it out in quantities to be fixed in proportion to the needs of those who are in want of it. It is not right that any one should lack the necessaries of life on my lands as long as I have a superabundance. Gentlemen, you are good fellows. I trust to you entirely to make this distribution. You will oblige me by carrying out my intentions promptly; and by keeping the thing a secret."

Montesquieu then went away at once, to escape the thanks of his tenants. According to the friend—of a scenic turn of mind evidently—who accompanied him, wheat to the value of 6400 livres was distributed by the curés. To prevent the recurrence of the distress which he had so munificently relieved, Montesquieu estab-

INTRODUCTION

lished on his estates granaries for the poor (*greniers de charité*).

Montesquieu was, indeed, one of the best of landlords and country gentlemen. He was looked upon in France as a species of "Milord Anglais," as interested in men as in books; and he was so—in the peasants of La Brède, who were "not learned enough to make the worse appear the better reason," as well as in the wits of Paris. His habits and manners were as simple as could be. He would go about La Brède all day long with a white cotton cap on his head and a vine-pole over his shoulder; in which guise he was, of course, mistaken more than once for a vine-dresser, and asked by those who came to offer him "les hommages de l'Europe," if that "was the chateau of Montesquieu."¹ A Genevese naturalist, Trembley,² whom he had met in England, wrote to a friend, after having passed several days at La Brède in the autumn of 1752, "I cannot describe the pleasure I enjoyed during my stay. How

¹ Garat, "Mémoires sur le Dix-huitième Siècle."

² Sayoux, "Le Dix-huitième Siècle à l'Etranger."

INTRODUCTION

beautiful, how charming the things I heard ! What do you think of conversations which begin at one o'clock in the day and last till eleven at night ? Now there was talk of the loftiest subjects ; anon full-bodied laughter over some delightful story. . . . I talked much of agriculture with M. de Montesquieu. In a conversation on that subject he exclaimed :

‘ O fortunatos nimium sua si bona norint
Agricolas ! ’

adding, ‘ I have often thought of putting these words on the front of my house. ’ ”

The Earl of Charlemont wrote requesting an audience.¹ The reply was favourable, and he and his companion, so excited were they at the prospect of seeing the great man, arrived at his house before he was up. The servant put them into the library, where “ the first thing we saw was an open book lying on a table at which he had probably sat on the preceding evening : the extinguished lamp was still in position.

¹ Fr. Hardy, “ Memoirs of Charlemont.”

INTRODUCTION

Impatient to know the night reading of the great philosopher, we stepped at once to the volume: it was the *Elegies* of Ovid, open at one of the most gallant pages. We had not recovered from our surprise, when it was increased by the entrance of the president, whose appearance and manners were entirely opposed to the idea which we had formed of him. Instead of a grave and austere philosopher, whose very presence would have intimidated young folk like us, the person who addressed us was a Frenchman"—even the French philosophers are French!—"gay, polished, full of vivacity, who, after a thousand agreeable greetings, and a thousand thanks for the honour which we did him, invited us to breakfast; but" . . . in short, we went to walk instead. "At the skirt of a fine wood, cut in alleys, surrounded by a paling, and entered by a gate three feet high and fastened with a chain, 'Come on,' said he, after having searched in his pocket, 'it is not worth while waiting for the key. You can jump as well as I, I am sure, and it's not a gate like that I'm afraid of.' So

INTRODUCTION

saying, he ran at the gate and leapt over it as light as you like. He had noticed our embarrassment on first meeting him—for we were much moved—and so he set to work, out of pure good-nature, to put us at our ease. Little by little his age and his genius disappeared so completely that the conversation became as free and easy as if we had been his equals in every respect. We spoke of the arts and sciences. He questioned us on our travels, and as I had visited the east he addressed himself particularly to me, interesting himself in the smallest details of the lands through which I had travelled. I heard him say more than once that he regretted not having seen these countries. . . . After having made the tour of his estate, laid out in the English style, we returned and were received by Madame la Baronne and her daughter. . . . The meal was simple and abundant. After dinner Montesquieu insisted that we should stay, and he kept us for three days, during which his conversation was equally amusing and instructive." This, though of the gushing order, is evidently a true

INTRODUCTION

picture of the man who said, "He who writes well does not write as people write, but as he writes; very often in talking badly such a one writes well." To himself may be applied what he said of Montaigne: "In most authors I see a writing man; in Montaigne, a thinking man." He was always saying, "The misfortune of certain books is the killing work one has to do in condensing what the author took so much trouble to expand."

IX

This simplicity was the great charm of the man, as it is that of the writer. He never lectures the reader, he talks with him; "he makes him assist him in his composition." In Paris he was, as in the country, as in his books, even-tempered, simple, and pleasantly merry. In the very heat of conversation he never lost his equanimity. Simple, profound, sublime, he charmed, instructed, without offence: was even more marvellous in conversation than

INTRODUCTION

in his works:¹ "and always that same energy when his hatred of despotism lighted his face."² Without bitterness, without satire, full of wit and brilliant sallies, no one could tell a better story, promptly, vividly, without premeditation.³ And he was always more willing to listen than to talk; he learnt as much from conversation as from books. The Duchess de Chaulnes said of him, "That man makes his book in society: he remembers everything that is said to him, and only talks with those who have something to tell him worth remembering." Such a man requires the company of the best brains to bring him out; with commonplace people he will be commonplace: and yet he could find wit in those who were called dull.⁴ It was possible, however, to bore him. On one occasion, when disputing with some portentous councillor who got warm and cried, "M. le Président, if it is not as I say, I will give you my head," he replied, coolly,

¹ Maupertuis, "Éloge de Montesquieu."

² Garat, "Mémoires sur le Dix-huitième Siècle."

³ D'Alembert, "Éloge de Montesquieu."

⁴ "Pensées."

INTRODUCTION

"I accept; little gifts are the cement of friendship."¹ A certain young lady, *un peu galante*, annoyed him with a torrent of questions one evening. His opportunity came when she asked him in what happiness consisted. "Happiness," he replied, "means for queens, fertility; for maidens, sterility; and for those who are near you, deafness."² Still he delighted in the company and conversation of women, and in his younger days did not object to be in their best graces. He tells us that he attached himself to such as he thought loved him, and detached himself as soon as he thought they didn't:³ the manners of the Regency being somewhat different from ours.

X

The eighteenth century was in France the age of the "monstrous regiment of women." The divine right of kings, as it had done in England half a century before, resolved

¹ Laplace, "Pièces intéressantes et peu connues."

² *Ibid.*

³ "Pensées."

INTRODUCTION

itself into the divine right of mistresses. One legacy bequeathed by them was the French Revolution; modern conversation was the other. In England conversation remained among men, and produced clubs; in France women invaded it, and the salon was the result: the heyday past, the Regent's mistress, the minister's mistress, opened a salon, where Montesquieu and all celebrities might meet to talk. Claudine Guérin de Tencin, saddened by the suicide of a lover and the arrival of her forty-fifth year; Madame Geoffrin, "whimsical and cross-grained," citizen's daughter, millionaire's widow, who had the excellent talent of drawing every one out in his own subject, and called her salon "a shop;" Marie de Vichy, Marquise du Deffand, whom Massillon could not convert, who was interested in nothing, and had neither temperament nor romance; and the Duchess de Chaulnes, the "intimate enemy" of Madame du Deffand, "a typical woman of the eighteenth century," delighting only in wit, *bons-mots*, and gallantry, and made piercingly sagacious by her wicked life: these and others

INTRODUCTION

like them kept salons, primarily for their own amusement. Earnest talk on momentous matters was the one thing forbidden. Clear analysis of questions of finance, of morality, of legislation, clear mockery of the problems of human destiny, and facile, brilliant, and winged talk, "on everything *à propos* of nothing," was the order of the day.

Madame du Deffand was Montesquieu's favourite among these. She gathered about her in her own phrase "*les trompeurs, le trompés, et les trompettes*"—everybody connected with diplomacy, in fact. In her salon the author of "*L'Esprit des Lois*" learned much. "I like that woman," he said, "with all my heart; she pleases me, amuses me; it is impossible to weary in her company." It was in this society that Montesquieu "talked out" his books; and the reader should remember that it was for this society they were written.

Montesquieu was often glad to retire from the "official centres of conversation" to quieter houses, where he could be more at home, and where he could meet such

INTRODUCTION

marvels of the age as the two sisters of Madame de Rochefort, "the Marquise de Boufflers, who was faithful to her lover, and the Duchesse de Mirepoix, who was faithful to her husband." But of all salons he preferred that of the Duchesse d'Aiguillon. There he met the most interesting men of the day of all nationalities, attracted by the impartiality of the duchess, her abundant and original wit, her refined talk, her obliging manners, and her ability to speak four languages. Gustavus III. called her the "living journal of the court, the city, the provinces, and the Academy." But she had judgment also; and authors consulted her about their works. Montesquieu liked her for herself, and also because in her house he could meet Madame Dupré de Saint-Maur, wife of the Intendant of Bordeaux, who was "equally charming as mistress, as wife, and as friend." It was in the arms of Madame Dupré de Saint-Maur that Montesquieu died on the 10th of February, 1755, in his sixty-sixth year.

INTRODUCTION

XI

Of "L'Esprit des Lois," perhaps the greatest French book of the eighteenth century, "La Grandeur des Romains et leur décadence," and Montesquieu's minor works, it is not necessary to speak here. It has been said that Montesquieu only wrote one book, the "Persian Letters" and the "Grandeur and Decadence of the Romans" being studies for "L'Esprit des Lois;" but with a master the sketch is as perfect a work of art as the completed picture. "Timidity"—Montesquieu was a severe judge of himself—"timidity has been the curse of my life," he said; but his very dread of being weak—which he never was—helped to make his first work a masterpiece.

INTRODUCTION

XII

Quesnay, the elder Mirabeau, Raynal, Morelly, Servan, Malesherbes, Voltaire, Beccaria, Filangieri, Blackstone, Ferguson, all descend from Montesquieu ; and Gibbon found "the strong ray of philosophic light," which "broke from Scotland in our times" upon political economy, only a reflection, though with a far steadier and more concentrated force, from the scattered but brilliant sparks kindled by the genius of Montesquieu. Chateaubriand and Benjamin Constant imitated him ; Talleyrand, the best servant France ever had, was his disciple. Catherine of Russia said, "His 'Esprit des Lois' is the breviary of sovereigns." The men of the French Revolution swore by him. Robespierre was parodying him when he said, "The principle of democratic government is virtue ; the means of its establishment, terror ;" and Napoleon honoured him by discarding him as an ideologist.

INTRODUCTION

France never had a wiser counsellor, "his blood and judgment were so well commingled;" but he could not prevent the Revolution any more than Horatio could have saved Hamlet.

JOHN DAVIDSON.

LONDON,
September 1891.

SOME REFLECTIONS

ON

THE PERSIAN LETTERS¹

NOTHING in the "Persian Letters" has been found more attractive than the unexpected discovery of a sort of story, which can be followed easily from beginning to end. A chain of circumstance connects the various characters. In proportion as their stay in Europe is extended, the morals and manners of that part of the world appear to them less wonderful and odd; and the degree in which they are affected by the marvellous and the eccentric depends upon the difference in their dispositions. On the other hand, the Asiatic

¹ These reflections first appeared as an introduction to the quarto edition of the "Persian Letters" (1754), and have always been ascribed to Montesquieu himself.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON

seraglio¹ becomes more disorderly the longer Usbek remains away—that is to say, in proportion as frenzy increases and love abates.

Another cause of the success of romances of this kind lies in the fact that events are described by the characters themselves as actually happening. This produces a sensational effect unattainable in the narrative of an outsider; and it is to this that the popularity of certain works which have appeared since the publication of the “Persian Letters” is mainly due.

Although in the regular novel, digressions are inadmissible unless they themselves constitute a fresh romance, and argumentative discussion is altogether beside the mark, since the characters are not brought together for the purpose of chopping logic; yet, in the epistolary form, where accident selects the characters, and the subjects dealt with are independent of any design or preconceived plan, the author is enabled to mingle philosophy, politics, and

¹ A *seraglio* is a royal dwelling. Montesquieu uses the word as if it were synonymous with *harem*, the name of that portion of an oriental mansion in which the women are sequestered.

THE PERSIAN LETTERS

morality with romance, and to connect the whole by a hidden, and somewhat novel, bond.

So great was the sale of the "Persian Letters" when they came out that publishers did their utmost to obtain sequels. They button-holed every author they met, and entreated him to write "Persian Letters."

What I have just stated, however, should convince the reader that they do not admit of a sequel,¹ still less of any admixture with even the cleverest "letters" from the hand of another.²

Some remarks have been found by many people sufficiently audacious; but I beg them to consider the nature of the work. The Persians, who were to play so important a part in it, found themselves suddenly in Europe, transplanted, to all intents and purposes, into another world. It was therefore necessary for some time to represent

¹ Probably an allusion to Lord Lyttleton's "Letters of Selim," published in English in 1735, and shortly afterwards translated into French.

² A reference to the "Lettres Turques" of Sainte-Foix, which in the edition of 1740 appeared collectively with the "Persian Letters."

SOME REFLECTIONS ON

them as ignorant and full of prejudices:¹ attention was bestowed exclusively on the formation and development of their ideas. Their first thoughts must have been exceptional. It seemed to the author that all he had to do was to endow them with singularity in as spirited a manner as he could; and to this end what more was necessary than to depict their state of mind in presence of whatever appeared to them extraordinary? Nothing was further from his thoughts than the idea of compromising any principle of our religion—he did not even suspect himself of the simplest indiscretion. What questionable remarks there are on religion will always be found united with feelings of surprise and astonishment, and not with any critical intention, still less with that of censure. Why should these Persians appear better informed when speaking of our religion, than when they discuss our manners and customs? And if they do sometimes find our dogmas singular, it is always a proof of their entire ignorance of

¹ At one time Montesquieu intended to remove what he called “certain *juvenilia*” from the “Persian Letters”; but the intention was never carried out.

THE PERSIAN LETTERS

the connection between those dogmas and other religious truths.

The author advances this justification out of his love for these great truths, independently of his respect for the human race, whose tenderest feelings he certainly did not intend to wound. The reader is, therefore, requested not for one moment to regard the remarks referred to as other than the result of amazement in people who could not fail to be amazed, or as the paradoxes of men who were in no condition to be paradoxical. The reader should also observe that the whole charm of the work lies in the continuous contrast between the existing state of things and the remarkable, artless, or odd manner in which they are regarded. Beyond a doubt, the nature and design of the "Persian Letters" are so obvious that they can only deceive those who are inclined to deceive themselves.



INTRODUCTION

1721

I AM not about to write a dedication, nor do I solicit protection for this work. It will be read, if it is good; and if it is bad, I am not anxious that it should be read.

I have issued these first letters in order to gauge the public taste; in my portfolio I have a goodly number more which I may hereafter publish.¹

This, however, depends upon my remaining unknown: let my name once be published and I cease to write. I know a lady who walks well enough, but who limps if she is watched.² Surely the blemishes of my book are sufficient to make it needless that

¹ Some of these letters were added in the edition of 1754.

² This lady has been identified with the author's wife.

INTRODUCTION

I should submit those of my person to the critics. Were I known, it would be said, "His book is at odds with his character; he might have employed his time to better purpose; it is not worthy of a serious man." Critics are never at a loss for such remarks, because there goes no great expense of brains to the making of them.

The Persians who wrote these letters lodged at my house, and we spent our time together: they looked upon me as a man belonging to another world, and so they concealed nothing from me. Indeed, people so far from home could hardly be said to have secrets. They showed me most of their letters, and I copied them. I also intercepted some, mortifying to Persian vanity and jealousy, which they had been particularly careful to conceal from me.

I am therefore nothing more than a translator: all my endeavour has been to adapt the work to our taste and manners. I have relieved the reader as much as possible of Asiatic phraseology, and have spared him an infinitude of sublime expressions which would have driven him wild.

INTRODUCTION

Nor does my service to him end there. I have curtailed those tedious compliments of which the Orientals are as lavish as ourselves; and I have omitted a great many trifling matters which barely survive exposure to the light, and ought never to emerge from the obscurity proper to "small beer."

Had most of those who have given the world collections of letters done likewise, their works would have disappeared in the editing.

One thing has often astonished me, and that is, that these Persians seemed often to have as intimate an acquaintance as I myself with the manners and customs of our nation, an acquaintance extending to the most minute particulars and not unpossessed of many points which have escaped the observation of more than one German traveller in France. This I attribute to the long stay which they made, without taking into consideration how much easier it is for an Asiatic to become acquainted with the manners and customs of the French in one year, than it would be for a Frenchman to become acquainted with

INTRODUCTION

the manners and customs of the Asiatics in four, the former being as communicative as the latter are reserved.

Use and wont permits every translator, and even the most illiterate commentator, to adorn the beginning of his version, or of his parody, with a panegyric on the original, and to extol its usefulness, its merit, and its excellence. It should not be very difficult to divine why I have not done so. One very excellent reason may be given: it would simply be adding tediousness to what is in itself necessarily tedious, namely, a preface.

PERSIAN LETTERS

LETTER I

Usbek to his friend Rustan, at Ispahan

WE stayed only one day at Koum. After having said our prayers before the tomb of the virgin who brought forth twelve prophets,¹ we resumed our journey, and yesterday, the twenty-sixth day since our departure from Ispahan, we came to Tauris.

Rica and myself are perhaps the first Persians who have left their native country urged by the thirst for knowledge; who have abandoned the amenities of a tranquil life for the laborious search after wisdom.

Although born in a prosperous realm, we did not believe that its boundaries should

¹ Fatima, daughter of Mohammed, and wife of Ali—according to the Koran, one of the four perfect women.

PERSIAN LETTERS

limit our knowledge, and that the lore of the East should alone enlighten us.

Tell me, without flattery, what is said of our journey: I do not expect that it will be generally commended. Address your letter to Erzeroum, where I shall stay for some time. Farewell, my dear Rustan. Rest assured that in whatever part of the world I may be, you have in me a faithful friend.

Tauris, the 15th of the moon of Saphar,¹ 1711.

LETTER II

*Usbek to the chief black Eunuch, at his
Seraglio in Ispahan*

YOU are the faithful keeper of the loveliest women in Persia; I have entrusted you with what in this world is most dear to me; you bear the keys of those fatal doors which are opened only for me. Whilst you watch over this precious storehouse of my affections, my heart, at rest, enjoys an absolute freedom from care. You guard it

¹ More correctly *Sufar*, the second month of the Persian year.

in the silence of the night as well as in the bustle of the day. Your unrelaxing care sustains virtue when it wavers. Should the women whom you guard incline to swerve from their duty, you would destroy their hopes in the bud. You are the scourge of vice, and the very monument of fidelity.

You command them and they obey. You fulfil implicitly all their desires, and exact from them a like obedience to the laws of the seraglio ; you take a pride in rendering them the meanest services ; you submit to their lawful commands with reverence and in dread ; you serve them like the slave of their slaves. But, resuming your power, you command imperiously, as my representative, whenever you apprehend any slackening of the laws of chastity and modesty.

Never forget that I raised you from the lowest position among my slaves, to set you in your present place as the trusted guardian of the delights of my heart. Maintain the most humble bearing in the presence of those who partake my love ; but, at the same time, make them deeply conscious of their own powerlessness. Provide for them all innocent pleasures ; beguile them of

PERSIAN LETTERS

their anxiety; entertain them with music, dancing, and delicious drinks; persuade them to meet together frequently. If they wish to go into the country, you may escort them thither; but lay hands on every man who dares to enter their presence. Exhort them to that cleanliness which is the symbol of the soul's purity; speak sometimes of me. I long to see them again in that delightful place which they adorn. Farewell.

Tauris, the 18th of the moon of Saphar, 1711.

LETTER III

Zachi to Usbek, at Tauris

WE instructed the chief of the eunuchs to take us into the country; he will inform you that we arrived there without accident. When we had to leave our litters in order to cross the river, we went, as usual, into boxes: two slaves carried us on their shoulders, and we were seen by nobody.

Dear Usbek, how can I endure existence in your seraglio at Ispahan! It recalls everlastingly my past happiness, provoking daily my desires with renewed vehemence.

LETTER III

I wander from room to room, always searching for you, and never finding you; mocked at every turn by the cruel memory of my vanished bliss. Sometimes I behold you in that spot where I first received you in my arms; again I see you in the room where you decided that famous quarrel among your women. Each of us asserted superiority in beauty. We came before you, after having exhausted our fancy in decking ourselves with jewellery and ornaments. You noted with pleasure the marks of our art; you were astonished at the height to which we had carried our desire to please you. But you soon made those borrowed graces give way to more natural charms; you destroyed the result of our arts: we were compelled to despoil ourselves of those ornaments, now become common to you, and to appear before you in the simplicity of nature. For me, vanity counted as nothing; I thought only of conquest. Happy Usbek! what did you then behold. Long you led me from enchantment to enchantment, till I was able to control your roving fancy; your grace, required your willing

PERSIAN LETTERS

tribute; in an instant you covered us all with your kisses; your eager looks strayed into the recesses of our charms; you made us vary our attitudes a thousand times; and new commands brought forth new obedience. I avow it, Usbek, a passion stronger even than ambition filled me with a desire to please you. Gradually I saw myself become your heart's mistress; you chose me, left me, returned to me, and knew how to keep your love: my triumph was the despair of my rivals. You and I felt as if we were the sole inhabitants of the world: nothing but ourselves deserved a moment's thought. Would to Heaven my rivals had been brave enough to witness all the proofs of love you gave me. Had they watched well my transports, they would have felt the difference between love and mine; it would have been to them that, though they might desire the palm of beauty, they could not vie with me in tenderness. . . . But what is the use of this vain rehearsal? Where has this vain rehearsal led me? It is a misfortune not to be loved, but love withdrawn from one is an affliction. You abandon us, Usbek, to v

LETTER IV

barbarous climes. What! do you count it as nothing to be loved? Alas! you do not even know what you lose! The sighs I heave there is none to hear; my falling tears you are not by to pity. Your insensibility takes you further and further from the love that throbs for you in your seraglio. Ah! my beloved Usbek, if you only knew your happiness!

The Seraglio at Fatme, the 21st of the
moon of Maharram,¹ 1711.

LETTER IV

Zephis to Usbek, at Erzeroum

AT length the black monster has resolved to drive me to despair. He is absolutely determined to deprive me of my slave, Zelida—Zelida, who serves me with such affection, and at whose magical touch new charms appear. Nor is he satisfied with the pangs this separation causes me; he is bent on my dishonour. The wretch

¹ More correctly *Muharram*, the first month of the Persian year. Zachi's letter was, therefore, written about a month before the two that precede it.

PERSIAN LETTERS

pretends to treat as criminal the motives of my confidence, and because he was weary of standing behind the door, where I always tell him to wait, he dares to imagine that he heard or saw things which my fancy cannot even conceive. I am very unhappy! Neither my isolation nor my virtue can secure me from his preposterous suspicions. A vile slave would drive me from your heart, and I am called on to defend myself even in your bosom!—But no; I am too proud to justify myself: you alone shall vouch for my behaviour—your love and my love, and—need I say it, dear Usbek?—my tears.

The Seraglio at Fatme, the 29th of the
moon of Maharram, 1711.

LETTER V

Rustan to Usbek, at Erseroum

YOU are the one subject of conversation at Ispahan; nothing is talked of but your departure: some ascribe it to a giddy spirit, others to some heavy affliction; your friends are your only defenders, and they make no converts. People fail to understand why

LETTER VI

you should forsake your wives, your relations, your friends, and your native country, to visit lands of which Persians know nothing. Rica's mother is inconsolable; she wants her son again, whom, she declares, you have decoyed away. As for me, my dear Usbek, I am, of course, anxious to approve of all your actions; but I do not see how I am to pardon your absence, and, however good your reasons may be, my heart will never appreciate them.

Ispahan, the 28th of the first moon of
Rebiab,¹ 1711.

LETTER VI

Usbek to his friend Nessir, at Ispahan

AT the distance of a day's journey from Erivan we left Persian ground, and entered Turkish territory. Twelve days after, we reached Erzeroum, where we stayed three or four months.

I own, Nessir, I felt sorry, though I did not show it, when I lost sight of Persia and

¹ *Rabi* means "the spring" in Persian. *Rabi-ul-azval*, "the first (month) of spring," is the third of the Persian year.

PERSIAN LETTERS

found myself among the treacherous Osmanli. It seems to me that I become more and more of a pagan the further I advance into this heathenish country.¹

My fatherland, my family, and my friends came vividly before me; my affections revived; and, to crown all, an indefinable uneasiness laid hold of me, warning me that I had ventured on too great an undertaking for my peace of mind.

But that which afflicts me most is the memory of my wives. I have only to think of them to be consumed with grief.

Do not imagine that I love them: insensibility in that matter, Nessir, has left me without desires. Living with so many wives, I have forestalled love—it has indeed been its own destruction; but from this very callousness there springs a secret jealousy which devours me. I behold a band of women left almost entirely to them-

¹ The Persians generally belong to the sect of Shiites, who consider Abu Bekr, Omar, and Othman, the first three successors of Mohammed, as usurpers, and regard Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet, as the first true Iman, and equal to Mohammed. The Shiites also reject as unworthy of credit the Sonna, a collection of traditions which is the canon of the faith of the Sunites, the sect to which the Turks belong.

LETTER VII

selves ; except some low-minded wretches, no one is answerable for their conduct. I would hardly feel safe, if my slaves were faithful : how would it be if they were not so ? What doleful tidings may I not receive in those far-off lands which I am about to visit ! The mischief of this is, that my friends are unable to help me ; they are forbidden to inquire into the sources of my misery ; and what could they do after all ? I would prefer a thousand times that such faults should remain unknown because uncorrected, than that they should become notorious through some condign punishment ! I unbosom myself to you, my dear Nessim : it is the only consolation left me in my misery.

Erzeroum, the 10th of the second moon
of Rebiab, 1711.

LETTER VII

Fatme to Usbek, at Erzeroum

YOU have been gone for two months, my dear Usbek, and I am so dejected that I cannot yet persuade myself you have been so long away. I wander through every corner of

PERSIAN LETTERS

the seraglio as if you were there ; I cherish that sweet delusion. What is there left to do for a woman who loves you ; who has been accustomed to clasp you in her arms ; whose only desire was to give you new proofs of her affection ; who was born to the blessings of freedom, but became a slave through the ardour of her passion ?

When I married you, my eyes had not yet seen the face of man ; and you are still the only man whom I have been permitted to look on :¹ for I do not count as men those frightful eunuchs whose least imperfection is that they are not men. When I compare the beauty of your countenance with the deformity of theirs, I cannot forbear esteeming myself a happy woman : my imagination can conceive no more ravishing idea than the bewitching charms of your person. I pledge you my word, Usbek, that were I allowed to leave this place in which the necessity of my condition detains me ; could I escape from the guards who hem me in on all sides—even if I were allowed to choose among all the men who

¹ In Persia the women are confined much more closely than among the Turks or Indians.—(M.)

LETTER VII

dwell in this capital of nations—Usbek, I swear to you, I would choose none but you: there is no man else in the wide world worthy a woman's love.

Do not think that your absence has led me to neglect those charms which have endeared me to you: although I may not be seen by any one, and the ornaments with which I deck myself do not affect your happiness, I strive notwithstanding to omit no art that can arouse delight; I never go to rest until I am all perfumed with the sweetest essences. I recall that happy time when you came to my arms; a flattering dream deceives me, and shows me the dear object of my love; my fond imagination is whelmed in its desires; sometimes I think that, disgusted with the trials of your journey, you are hurrying home: between waking and sleeping the night is spent in such vague dreams; I seek for you at my side, and you seem to flee from me; until at last the very fire which burns me disperses these unsubstantial joys, and I am broad awake. Then my agitation knows no bounds. . . . You will not believe me, Usbek, but it is impossible to live like this; liquid fire courses

PERSIAN LETTERS

in my veins: why cannot I find words to tell you all I feel, and why do I feel so deeply what I cannot utter? In such moments, Usbek, I would give the world for a single kiss. What an unhappy woman is she who, having such passionate desires as these, is deprived of the company of him who alone can satisfy them! Abandoned to herself, with nothing to divert her, her whole life is spent in sighs and in the frenzy of a goading passion. Instead of being happy, she has not even the privilege of ministering to the happiness of another: a useless ornament of a seraglio, she is kept for her husband's credit merely, and not for his enjoyment! You men are the cruellest creatures! Delighted when we have desires that we cannot gratify, you treat us as if we had no emotions—though you would be very sorry if that were so: you imagine that our long repressed love will be quickened when we behold you. It is very difficult for a man to make himself beloved; the easiest plan is to obtain from our constitutional weakness what you dare not hope to obtain through your own merit.

Farewell, my dear Usbek, farewell. Believe

LETTER VIII

that I live only to adore you : the thought of you fills my soul ; and your absence, far from making me forget you, would make my love more vehement, if that were possible.

The Seraglio at Ispahan, the 12th of the
first moon of Rebiab, 1711.

LETTER VIII

Usbek to his friend Rustan, at Ispahan

I GOT your letter at Erzeroum, where I am now. I was quite certain that my departure would cause some stir, but that gives me no trouble : which would you have me obey—the petty maxims that guide my enemies, or the dictates of my own free soul ?

From my earliest youth I have been a courtier ; and yet I make bold to say that my heart has remained uncorrupted : indeed, I conceived the grand idea of daring to be virtuous even at court. From the moment I recognised vice, I withdrew from it ; afterwards, when I approached it, it was only to unmask it. I carried my veracity even to the foot of the throne,

PERSIAN LETTERS

and spoke a language never heard there before ; I disconcerted flattery, amazing at the same time the idol and its worshippers.

But when I saw that my sincerity had made me enemies, and had brought upon me the jealousy of the ministers, without attracting the favour of the prince, I determined to forsake a corrupt court in which my unseconded virtue could no longer maintain me. I feigned a mighty interest in science ; and, by dint of pretending, soon became really attached to it. I ceased to be a man of affairs, and retired to a house in the country. But even here persecution followed me : the malice of my enemies almost deprived me of the means of protecting myself. Information received in secret led me to consider my position seriously : I resolved to leave my native land, and my withdrawal from court supplied a plausible excuse. I waited on the king ; I emphasised the great desire I had to acquaint myself with the sciences of the west, and hinted that my travels might even be of service to him. I found favour in the king's sight ; I set out, and snatched from my enemies their expected victim.

LETTER IX

Here, Rustan, you have the true motive of my journey. Let them talk in Ispahan; say nothing in my defence except to my friends. Leave the evil-disposed to their misconstructions; I would be too happy if that were the only harm they could do me.

They discuss me at present; perhaps I shall soon be forgotten, and my friends . . . But no, I will not, Rustan, resign myself to these sad thoughts: I will always be dear to them; I rely upon their faithfulness as upon yours.

Erzeroum, the 20th of the second moon
of Gemmadi,¹ 1711.

LETTER IX

The Chief Eunuch to Ibbi,² at Erzeroum

YOU follow your old master on his travels; you wander through provinces and kingdoms; no grief can make any impression

¹ The two *Gemmadis*, or *Gemalis*, are the fifth and sixth months of the Persian year. *Gemal-i-ul-awal* is the first of these.

² This is the only letter to Ibbi, and there is only one from him, the XXXIX. He must not be confounded with Ibben, to whom many letters are addressed.

PERSIAN LETTERS

on you ; you see new sights all day long ; everything you behold entertains you, and you are unconscious of the flight of time.

It is not so with me. Shut up in a hideous prison, I am always surrounded by the same objects ; there is no change even in what vexes me. Weighed down by fifty years of care and annoyance, I lament my wretched case : all my life long I have never passed a single untroubled day, or known a peaceful moment.

When my first master formed the cruel design of entrusting his wives to my care, and induced me by flattering promises, supplemented by a thousand threats, to separate myself for ever from my manhood, tired of the toilsome service in which I was engaged, I calculated that the sacrifice of my passions would be more than repaid by ease and wealth. How unfortunate was I ! Preoccupied with the thought of the ills I would escape, I had no idea of the others to which I fled : I expected that the inability to satisfy love would secure me from its assaults. Alas ! although passion had been rendered inefficient, its force remained unabated ; and, far from being

relieved, I found myself surrounded by objects which continually whetted my desires. When I entered the seraglio, where everything filled me with regret for what I had lost, my agitation increased each moment; a thousand natural charms seemed to unfold themselves to my sight only to tantalise me; and to crown my misery, I had constantly before me their fortunate possessor. While this wretched time lasted, I never led a woman to my master's bed without feeling wild rage in my heart, and despair unutterable in my soul.

And thus I passed my miserable youth, with no confidant but my own bosom. Wearied with longing and sad as night, there was nothing left but to endure in silence. I was forced to turn the sternest glances on those very women whom I would fain have regarded with looks of love. It would have undone me had they read my thoughts: how they would have tyrannised over me! I remember one day, as I attended a lady at the bath, I was so carried away that I lost command of myself, and dared to lay my hand where I should not. My first thought was that my last day had

PERSIAN LETTERS

come. I was, however, fortunate enough to escape a dreadful death ; but the fair one, whom I had made the witness of my weakness, extorted a heavy price for her silence : I entirely lost command of her, and she forced me, each time at the risk of my life, to comply with a thousand caprices.

At length, the fire of youth burnt out, I grow old and become, in that particular, at peace with myself. Women I regard with indifference, I pay them back for all their contempt, and all the torments which I suffered through them. I never forget that I was born to command them, and in the exercise of my authority I feel as if I had recovered my lost manhood. I hate women now that I can regard them without passion, and detect and discuss all their weaknesses. Although I guard them for another, I experience a secret joy in making myself obeyed. When I take all their pleasures from them, I feel as if it were at my behest alone ; and that always gives me satisfaction more or less direct. The seraglio is my empire ; and my ambition, the only passion left me, finds no small gratification. I mark with pleasure that all depends on me, and

LETTER IX

that my presence is required at all times : I willingly incur the hatred of all these women, because that establishes me more firmly in my post. And they do not hate me for nothing, I can tell you : I interfere with their most innocent pleasures ; I am always in the way, an insurmountable obstacle ; before they know where they are they find their schemes frustrated ; I am armed with refusals, I bristle with scruples ; not a word is heard from me but duty, virtue, chastity, modesty. I make them desperate by dinning them with the weakness of their sex, and the authority of our master. Then I lament the necessity which requires me to be so severe, and lead them to believe that my only motives are their truest interests and my profound attachment to them.

Do not suppose that in my turn I have not to suffer endless unpleasantness. Every day these women seek occasions to repay me with interest, and their reprisals ¹ are

¹ *Revers* in the original. M. Laboulaye asserts that Montesquieu is the only writer who uses *revers* in the sense of *revanche* ; but Littré gives examples of a similar use of the word in Molière and Bossuet.

PERSIAN LETTERS

often terrible. Between us there goes on a constant interchange of ascendancy and obedience. They are always putting upon me the meanest services ; they affect a sublime contempt ; and, regardless of my age, they force me to rise ten times during the night for the merest trifle. I am worn off my feet with endless commissions, orders, employments, and caprices ; one would think that they take turn about in inventing occupations for me. They often amuse themselves by making me doubly vigilant ; they give me imaginary confidences. Sometimes I am told that a young man has been seen prowling round the walls, or a startling noise has been heard, or some one is about to receive a letter. All this bothers me, and amuses them ; they are delighted when they see me tormenting myself. Sometimes they station me behind the door, and keep me standing there night and day. They well know how to pretend to be ill, to swoon away, to be frightened out of their wits : they are never at a loss for some pretext to work their will on me. When they are in this mood, implicit obedience, unquestioning

compliance are my only resources : a refusal from such a man as I am would be a thing unheard of ; and if I were to hesitate in obeying them, they could punish me at their discretion. I would sooner die, my dear Ibbi, than submit to such humiliation.

But this is not all. I am never for an instant sure of my master's favour ; for each of his wives is an enemy who never ceases to hope for my ruin. They take advantage of certain snatches of time when I cannot be heard, when he can refuse them nothing, and when I am always in the wrong. I conduct to my master's bed women whose spite is roused against me : do you imagine that they will move a finger in my behalf, or say a single word in my favour ? I have everything to fear from their tears, their sighs, their embraces, from their very pleasures ; it is their time of triumph ; their charms are arrayed against me : their present services obliterate in a moment all those rendered by me in the past ; and nothing can plead for me with a master who is no longer himself.

PERSIAN LETTERS

Many a time I lie down high in my master's favour, and awake to find myself disgraced. The day on which they whipped me so ignominiously round the seraglio, what had I done? I leave a woman in my master's arms: when she sees him impassioned she bursts into a torrent of tears, and pours out complaints so skilfully that they become more anguished in proportion as the love she causes grows vehement. What could I do to defend myself at a crisis of that kind? When I least expected it, ruin overtook me; I was the victim of an amorous intrigue, of a treaty sealed with sighs. Behold, dear Ibbi, the wretched plight in which I have always lived.

What happiness is yours! Your duties are confined to attendance on Usbek. It is easy for you to please him, and to retain his favour to your dying day.

The Seraglio at Ispahan, the last day of
the moon of Saphar, 1711.

LETTER X

Mirza to his friend Usbek, at Erzeroum

YOU alone could recompense me for the absence of Rica, and it is only Rica who could console me for yours. We miss you, Usbek ; you were the very life of our circle. How hard it is to break away from those attachments in which both the heart and the mind are engaged !

We have great debates here ; our talk turns principally on morality. We disputed yesterday whether true happiness consists in pleasure and sensual gratification, or in the practice of virtue.

I have heard you often affirm that men were made to be virtuous, and that justice is as indispensable to existence as life itself. I beg you to explain to me what you mean by this.

I have spoken of this to the mollahs,¹ but they exasperate me with their quotations from the Koran ; for I do not con-

¹ Montesquieu spells it "Mollaks." In Persia the mollah is a devotee ; in Turkey, a judge.

PERSIAN LETTERS

sult them as a true believer, but as a man, a citizen, and the father of a family. Farewell.

Ispahan, the last day of the moon
of Saphar, 1711.

LETTER XI

Usbek to Mirza, at Ispahan

YOU waive your own judgment in deference to mine;¹ you even deign to consult me; you profess your belief in my ability to instruct you. My dear Mirza, if there is one thing which flatters me more than your good opinion of me, it is the friendship which prompts it.

In the fulfilment of the task you have prescribed me, I do not think there is any necessity for argument of an abstruse order. There are certain truths which it is not sufficient to know, but which must be realised: such are the great commonplaces of morality. Probably the following fable

¹ “*Essayer la mienne*,” a Gascon provincialism for “*user*,” &c. The meaning is, therefore, as above, and not “to test mine.”

will affect you more than the most subtle argument :

Once upon a time there dwelt in Arabia a small tribe called Troglodites, descendants of the ancient Troglodites, who, if historians are to be believed,¹ were liker beasts than men. They were not, however, counterfeit presentments of the lower animals. They had not fur like bears ; they did not hiss like serpents ; and they did possess two eyes :² but they were so malicious, so brutish, that they lacked all notion of justice and equity.

A king of foreign origin reigned over them. Wishing to correct their natural wickedness, he treated them with severity ; but they conspired against him, slew him, and exterminated his line.

They then assembled to appoint a governing body. After many dissensions, they elected magistrates. These had not been long in office, when they found them intolerable, and killed them also.

Freed from this new yoke, the people

¹ Herodotus, Plutarch, Pomponius Mela, and Pliny the Elder, are the authorities for the Troglodites.

² Contradictions of assertions in Pomponius Mela.

PERSIAN LETTERS

were swayed only by their savage instincts. Every man determined to do what was right in his own eyes; and in attending to his own interests, the general welfare was forgotten.

This unanimous decision gave universal satisfaction. They said: "Why should I kill myself with work for those in whom I have no interest? I will only think of myself: how should the welfare of others affect me? I will provide for my own necessities; and, if these are satisfied, it is no concern of mine though all the other Troglodites live in misery."

Each man said to himself in seed-time, "I shall till no more land than will supply me with corn enough for my wants. What use have I for any more? I am not going to bother myself for nothing."

The land in this little kingdom was not all of the same quality: some of it was barren and mountainous; and other portions, lying low, were well-watered. One year a drought occurred, so severe, that the uplands bore no crop at all, whilst those that were well-watered brought forth abundantly. In consequence of this, the

highlanders almost all died of hunger, because the people of the lowlands had no mercy on them, and refused to share the harvest.

The year after, the weather being very wet, the higher grounds produced extraordinary crops, whilst the lowlands were flooded. Again half the people were famine-stricken; but the wretched sufferers found the mountaineers as hard as they themselves had been.

One of the chief men of the country had a very lovely wife. A neighbour of his fell in love with her, and carried her off. This gave rise to a bitter quarrel; and after many words and blows, the parties agreed to submit their case to the judgment of a Troglodite, who had been well esteemed during the republic. Having gone to him, they were about to argue the case before him, when he cried: "What does it matter to me whose wife she is? My land waits to be tilled; and I am not going to waste my time settling your quarrels and doing your business, when I might be attending to my own; be kind enough to leave me alone, and trouble me no more with your

PERSIAN LETTERS

disputes." With that he left them, and went to work in his fields. The ravisher, who was the stronger man, swore he would sooner die than give up the woman. The other, smarting under his neighbour's ill-treatment and the unfeeling conduct of the umpire, was going home in despair, when he met a fine young woman returning from the well. Having no longer a wife of his own, he was attracted towards her; and she pleased him all the more when he learnt that she was the wife of him whom he had solicited to judge his case, and who had proved so pitiless to him. He therefore seized the woman and carried her to his house.

Another man, the owner of some fairly productive ground, took great pains in its cultivation. Two of his neighbours conspired to drive him from his house, and seize his lands. They entered into a compact to oppose all who should try to oust them, and they actually succeeded for several months. One of the two, however, disgusted at having to share what might be his own exclusively, killed the other, and became sole master of the ground.

LETTER XI

But his reign was soon over: two other Troglodites attacked him, and as he was no match for them, they killed him.

Still another Troglodite, seeing some wool exposed for sale, asked the price of it. The seller argued thus with himself: "At the market price I should receive for my wool as much money as would buy two measures of corn; but I will sell it for four times that sum, and then I can buy eight measures." As the other wanted the wool, he paid the price demanded. "Many thanks," said the vendor, "I shall now buy some corn." "What," rejoined the buyer, "you want corn? I have some to sell; but the price will rather astonish you. You must know that, as there is a famine in the land, corn is extremely dear. If you return me my money, I will give you one measure of corn: I would not give you a grain more for the price, though you were to die of hunger."

Meantime a dreadful malady was ravaging the land. An able physician came from a neighbouring country, and prescribed with such success that he cured all his patients. When the plague ceased, he called for his fees, but was refused by one and all.

PERSIAN LETTERS

There was nothing for it but to return to his own country, which he reached worn to a skeleton by the fatigues of a long journey. Soon after he heard that the same disease had broken out afresh among these thankless people, and with more virulence than before. This time they did not wait for him, but sent to entreat his presence. "Begone," he cried, "unrighteous men! In your souls there is a poison more deadly than that which you wish me to cure; you are unworthy to live, for you are inhuman monsters, unacquainted with the first principles of justice. I will not offend the gods who punish you by opposing their just wrath."

Erzeroum, the 3rd of the second moon
of Gemmadi,¹ 1711.

LETTER XII

Usbek to the Same, at Ispahan

YOU have seen, my dear Mirza, how the Troglodites perished in their sins, the victims of their own unrighteousness. Only

¹ *Gemal-i-ul-sani*, the sixth month of the Persian year.

LETTER XII

two families escaped the doom which befell the nation.

In that country there lived two very remarkable men, humane, just, lovers of virtue. United by their uprightness as much as by the corruption of their fellows, they regarded the general desolation with hearts from which pity expelled every other feeling; and their compassion united them in a new bond. Together they laboured for their mutual benefit; no dissensions arose between them except such as may spring from the tenderest friendship. In a secluded part of the country, far removed from those who were unworthy of their companionship, they led a calm and happy life. The earth, glad to be tilled by such virtuous hands, seemed to yield her fruits of her own accord.

They loved their wives, and were beloved most tenderly. Their utmost care was given to the virtuous training of their children. They kept before their young minds the misfortunes of their countrymen, and held them up as a most melancholy example. Above all, they led them to see that the interest of the individual was bound up

PERSIAN LETTERS

in that of the community; that to isolate oneself was to court ruin; that the cost of virtue should never be counted, nor the practice of it regarded as troublesome; and that in acting justly by others, we bestow blessings on ourselves.

They soon enjoyed the reward of virtuous parents, which consists in having children like themselves. Happy marriages increased the number of the young people who grew up under their guidance. Although the community increased, there was still but one interest; and virtue, instead of losing its force in the crowd, grew stronger by reason of more numerous examples.

It is impossible to depict the happiness of these Troglodites! So upright a people could not fail to be the special objects of divine care. They were taught to reverence the Gods with the first dawning of intellect; and religion refined manners that nature had left untutored.

They established feasts in honour of the Gods. Young men and maidens, decked with flowers, worshipped them with dances and rural minstrelsy. Banquets followed, in which they struck a happy mean between

LETTER XII

mirth and frugality. At these gatherings nature spoke its artless language ; there the young folks learned how to make love's bargain of hearts : trembling girls blushed to find on their lips a promise which the blessing of their parents soon ratified ; tender mothers delighted themselves in forecasting happy marriages.

When they visited the temple it was not to ask of the Gods wealth and overflowing plenty ; these fortunate Troglodites regarded such requests as unworthy of them ; if they made them at all, it was not for themselves, but for their countrymen. They approached the altar only to pray for the health of their parents, for the unity of their brethren, for the love of their wives, the affection and obedience of their children. Thither the maidens came to offer up the sweet sacrifice of their hearts, asking in return only the right to make a Troglodite happy.

In the evening, when the flocks had left the fields, and the weary oxen had returned from ploughing, these people met together. During a frugal meal they sang of the crimes of the first Troglodites, and their

PERSIAN LETTERS

sad fate; of the revival of virtue with a new race, and of its happiness. Then they celebrated the greatness of the Gods, abounding in mercy to those who seek them, and visiting with inevitable judgments those who reverence them not. This would be followed by a description of the delights of a country life, and the happiness that springs from a state of innocence. Soon after they retired to rest, and their slumbers were unbroken by care or anxiety.

The provision of nature was sufficient for both their pleasures and their wants. A covetous man was unknown in this happy country. When they made presents, the giver always felt himself more blessed than the receiver. The whole race looked upon themselves as one single family; their flocks were almost always intermixed, and the only trouble which they usually shirked was that of separating them.

Erzeroum, the 6th of the second moon
of Gemmadi, 1711.

LETTER XIII

LETTER XIII

Usbek to the Same

I CANNOT say half I wish to about the virtue of the Troglodites. One of them once said, "To-morrow it is my father's turn to work in the fields; I shall rise two hours before him, and when he comes to his work he will find it all done."

Another said to himself, "I think my sister has taken a fancy for a young cousin of mine. I must talk to my father about it, and get him to arrange a marriage."¹

Another, being told that robbers had carried off his herd, replied, "I am very sorry, because it contained a white heifer which I meant to offer to the Gods."

One was heard telling another that he was bound for the temple to return thanks to Heaven for the recovery from sickness of his brother, who was so dear to his father, and whom he himself loved so much.

This also was once said: "In a field

¹ In Montesquieu's time it was not uncommon for parents of noble descent to compel their daughters to enter a convent in order that the eldest son might have greater means of display.

PERSIAN LETTERS

adjoining my father's, the workers are all day long exposed to the heat of the sun. I shall plant some trees there that these poor folks may sometimes rest in their shade."

On one occasion, in a company of Troglodites, an elderly man reproached a young one with the commission of an unworthy action. "We do not think him capable of such a deed," said the young men; "but if he has been guilty, may he outlive all his family."

A Troglodite having been told that strangers had robbed his house of all his goods, replied, "If they had not been unrighteous men, I would have prayed the Gods to give them a longer use of them than I have had."

Their unexampled prosperity was not regarded without envy. A neighbouring nation gathered together, and on some paltry pretext determined to carry off their cattle. As soon as they heard of this, the Troglodites despatched ambassadors, who addressed their enemies in the following terms: "What evil have the Troglodites done you? Have they carried off your wives, stolen your cattle, or ravaged your

lands? No; we are just men, and fear the Gods. What, then, do you require of us? Would you have wool to make clothes? Do you wish the milk of our cows, or the products of our fields? Lay down your arms, then; come with us, and we will give you all you demand. But we swear by all we hold most sacred, that if you enter our territories in enmity, we will regard you as dishonest men, and deal with you as we would with wild beasts."

This speech was received with contempt; and, believing that the Troglodites had no means of defence except their innocence, the barbarians invaded their territory in warlike array.

But the Troglodites were well prepared to defend themselves. They had placed their wives and children in their midst. Astonished they certainly were at the injustice of their enemies, but not dismayed by their number. Their hearts burned within them with an ardour before unknown. One longed to lay down his life for his father, another for his wife and children, this one for his brothers, that one for his friends, and all for each other.

PERSIAN LETTERS

When one fell in the fight, he who immediately took his place, besides fighting for the common cause, had the death of his comrade to avenge.

And so the battle raged between right and wrong. Those wretched creatures, whose sole aim was plunder, felt no shame when they were put to flight. They were forced to yield to the prowess of that virtue, whose worth they were unable to appreciate.

Erzeroum, the 9th of the second moon
of Gemmadi, 1711.

LETTER XIV

Usbek to the Same

AS their numbers increased every day, the Troglodites thought it behoved them to elect a king. They judged it wise to confer the crown upon the justest man among them; and their thoughts turned to one, venerable by reason of his age and his long career of virtue. He, however, had refused to attend the meeting, and withdrew to his house, oppressed with grief.

When deputies were sent to him to

announce his election, "The Gods forbid," cried he, "that I should wrong the Troglodites by permitting them to believe that there is no man among them more just than I! You offer me the crown; and if you insist upon it absolutely, I cannot but take it. Remember, however, that I shall die of sorrow, having known the Troglodites freemen, to behold them subjected to a ruler." Having said this, he burst into a torrent of tears. "Unhappy day!" he exclaimed. "Why have I lived to see it?" Then he upbraided them. "I see," he cried, "O Troglodites, what moves you to this; uprightness becomes a burden to you. In your present condition, having no head, you are constrained in your own despite to be virtuous; otherwise your very existence would be at stake, and you would relapse into the wretched state of your ancestors. But this seems to you too heavy a yoke; you would rather become the subjects of a king, and submit to laws of his framing—laws less exacting than your present customs. You know that then you would be able to satisfy your ambition, and while away the time in slothful

PERSIAN LETTERS

luxury ; and that, provided you avoided the graver crimes, there would be no necessity for virtue." He ceased speaking for a little, and his tears fell faster than ever. "And what do you expect of me? How can I lay commands upon a Troglodite? Would one act more nobly because I ordered him? You forget that a Troglodite without any command does what is right from natural inclination?

"O Troglodites, my days are nearly done, my blood is frozen in my veins, I shall soon join your blessed ancestors ; why would you have me carry them the sad news that you have submitted to another law than that of virtue?"

Erzeroum, the 10th of the second moon
of Gemmadi, 1711.

LETTER XV¹

*The first Eunuch to Jaron, the black Eunuch,
at Erzeroum*

MAY Heaven restore you to this country,
and deliver you from all danger!

¹ Letter XV. is the first of those added in the edition of 1754.

LETTER XV

Although friendship is a bond almost unknown to me, and although I am wrapped up in myself, yet you have made me feel that I have a heart; and while I was as a bronze statue to the rest of the slaves who lived under my rule, it was with pleasure that I watched your growth from infancy.

The time came when my master threw his eyes on you. Nature had not yet whispered her secrets, when the knife separated you from her for ever. I will not say whether I pitied you, or whether I was glad to see you brought into my own condition. I dried your tears and stilled your cries. I imagined that I saw you born again, issuing from a state of thralldom in which you would always have had to obey, to enter into a service in which you would exercise authority. I charged myself with your education. That severity, without which instruction is impossible, kept you long in ignorance of my love. You were dear to me, however; and I assure you that I loved you as a father loves his son, if the names of father and son can be applied to such as you and I.

PERSIAN LETTERS

Since you are to travel in countries inhabited by unbelieving Christians, it is impossible that you should escape defilement. How shall the prophet look on you with favour in the midst of so many millions of his enemies? I hope my master, on his return, will perform the pilgrimage to Mecca: you would be purified in that blessed place.

The Seraglio at Ispahan, the 10th of the second
moon of Gemmadi, 1711.

LETTER XVI

*Usbek to the Mollah Mehemet Ali, Guardian of
The Three Tombs¹ at Koum*

WHY, divine Mollah, do you live in the tombs? You are better fitted to dwell among the stars. Doubtless you hide yourself lest you should eclipse the sun: unlike the day-star you have no spots; but you resemble him in your cloudy concealment.

Your knowledge is more abysmal than

¹ The three tombs are those of Fatima and two votaries of her family. (See p. 11, Note.)

LETTER XVI

the ocean; your intellect, keener than Zufagar,¹ the twin-pointed sword of Hali. You know the secrets of the nine orders of celestial powers; you read the Koran on the breast of our holy Prophet, and when you come to an obscure passage, an angel, by his order, spreads his rapid wings, and descends from the throne to reveal to you its meaning.

I may, with your help, conduct a private correspondence with the seraphim; for, in short, O thirteenth Iman,² are you not the centre where earth and heaven meet, the point of communication between the abyss and the empyrean?

In the midst of a profane people, permit me to purify myself through you. Suffer me to turn my face towards the holy place in which you dwell; mark me off from among the wicked, as one distinguishes

¹ Zufagar, or Zoulsegar, the name of a double-bladed sword given by Mohammed to Ali. It was treasured for many years in the palace of the califs, until one of the successors of Abdoullah II. broke it by accident while hunting. A representation of this sword still appears on the flag of the Turkish navy.

² The first twelve successors of Mohammed were the Imans, or holy men. To address any one as the "thirteenth Iman" is, therefore, a high compliment.

PERSIAN LETTERS

night from day;¹ aid me with your counsels; be my soul's guardian; feed me with divine knowledge; and let me humbly expose to you the wounds of my spirit. Address your inspired letters to Erzeroum, where I shall stay for a month or two.

Erzeroum, the 11th of the second moon
of Gemmadi, 1711.

LETTER XVII

Usbek to the Same

I AM powerless, divine Mollah, to calm my impatience; I do not know how I am to wait for your sublime answer. I have doubts, which must be resolved; I feel that my reason has gone astray; restore it to the right path. Illumine my darkness, O source of light! Annihilate with the lightning of your divine pen the difficulties I am about to propose to you; enable me to commiserate myself, make me ashamed of the questions I ask you.

¹ In the original, "as one distinguishes at daybreak the white thread from the black." According to the Mussulmans, day begins when there is light enough to make this distinction.

LETTER XVII

Whence comes it that our lawgiver forbids the use of swine's flesh, and of all those meats which he denominates unclean? Why are we forbidden to touch a corpse, and why for the purification of our souls is this endless washing of the body ordained? To me it seems that things in themselves are neither clean nor unclean: I can conceive of no inherent quality which makes them the one or the other. The filthiness of filth consists in its offending our sight or some other sense; but in itself it is no dirtier than gold or diamonds. The idea of uncleanness, resulting from contact with a dead body, proceeds from a natural repugnance with which it fills us. If the bodies of those who do not wash offended neither the smell nor the sight, how could we tell that they were unclean? Should not, therefore, the senses, divine Mollah, be the only judges of what is clean or unclean? Yet, since the same objects do not affect all men alike, that which is agreeable to one producing disgust in another, it follows that the witness of the senses is no sure guide in this matter, unless we are permitted to decide the point, each according

PERSIAN LETTERS

to his fancy, and to separate for our own behoof things that are clean from those that are not.

But would not this, reverend Mollah, confound the distinctions established by our holy Prophet, and overturn the foundations of that law which was written by angelic hands ?

Erzeroum, the 20th of the second moon
of Gemmadi, 1711.

LETTER XVIII

*Mollah Mehemet Ali, Servant of the Prophets,
to Usbek, at Erzeroum*

YOU are always propounding questions that have been laid before our holy Prophet thousands of times. Why do you not read the traditions of the doctors ? Why not go to that pure fountain-head of all intelligence ? There you would find all your doubts resolved.

Unhappy man ! Constantly troubled about earthly things, you have never looked with a single eye on those of heaven. You reverence the life of the Mollahs, but

LETTER XVIII

you have not the courage to embrace and follow it.

O profane ones who never enter into the secrets of the Eternal, your light is as the darkness of the pit, and the reasonings of your minds are no more than the dust which rises as you walk, when the sun is at the highest pitch of noon in the scorching month of Chahban.¹

The very zenith of your understanding does not attain to the nadir of that of the least of the Imans: your vain philosophy is but as the lightning which heralds storm and darkness: in the midst of the tempest, you are driven by the wind and tossed.

Nothing is easier than the solution of your difficulty. For that purpose it is sufficient to narrate what happened once when our holy Prophet, tempted by the Christians and pestered by the Jews, effectually silenced both parties.

The Jew, Abdias Ibsalon,² asked him why God had prohibited the eating of swine's flesh. "There is good reason for

¹ More correctly, *Shaban*, the eighth month of the Persian year.

² Mohammedan tradition.—(M.)

PERSIAN LETTERS

it," answered Mohammed. "The creature is unclean, and of that I will convince you." He took some earth and shaped it into the figure of a man. Then he threw it on the ground, and cried, "Arise." Immediately a man stood up, and said, "I am Japhet, the son of Noah." "Was your hair as white at your death as it is now?" asked the holy Prophet. "No," replied he, "but when you roused me I thought the day of judgment had come; and such fear laid hold of me that my hair turned white on the instant."

"Now tell me," said the messenger of God, "the whole history of Noah's ark." Japhet obeyed, and after having minutely recounted all that passed during the first months, he continued as follows: "All the excrement of the animals we cast on one side of the ark, which made it lean so much that we were all in mortal terror, especially our wives, who made a terrible outcry. Our father Noah sought divine aid, and God commanded him to take the elephant and place him with his head towards the side that was overweighted. The excrement of the huge animal was so plentiful

LETTER XVIII

that there came forth from it a pig." Do you wonder, Usbek, that since then we have abstained from swine's flesh, and have regarded the animal as unclean?

"But, as the pig wallowed every day among the filth, he caused such a stench in the ark that he was himself compelled to sneeze; and from his nose there dropped a rat, which began to gnaw everything that came in his way. This became so intolerable to Noah, that he once more sought God's help in prayer. God commanded him to strike the lion a heavy blow on the forehead, which made him sneeze too, and from his nose there leapt a cat." Are you yet persuaded that these animals are unclean? How does it strike you?

When, therefore, you fail to understand the reason of the uncleanness of certain things, it is because you are ignorant of much else, and have no acquaintance with what has passed between God, the angels, and men. You know not the history of eternity; you have not read the writings that were penned in heaven; what has been revealed to you is but an insignificant part of the divine library: nay, those who, like

PERSIAN LETTERS

us, have approached so near that they may be said to live the heavenly life, are still in obscurity and darkness. Farewell. May Mohammed be in your heart!

Koum, the last day of the moon of
Chahban, 1711.

LETTER XIX

Usbek to his friend Rustan, at Ispahan

WE stayed only eight days at Tocat. After a journey of thirty-five days, we are now at Smyrna.

Between Tocat and Smyrna we did not see a single place worthy the name of town. I have marked with astonishment the weakness of the empire of the Osmanli : a diseased body, it is not supported by a plain and temperate diet, but by violent remedies, which exhaust and waste it away continually.

The pashas, who obtain office only by purchase, bankrupt when they enter their provinces, ravage them like conquered countries. The insolent militia are governed only by their own caprices. The towns are dismantled, the cities deserted, the country

LETTER XIX

desolate, agriculture and commerce entirely neglected.

Impunity is the order of the day under this ruthless government. The Christians who till the land, and the Jews who collect the taxes, are exposed to a thousand outrages.

Property in land is uncertain; and consequently the desire to increase its value has diminished: neither title nor possession is of any avail against the caprice of those in power.

These barbarians have abandoned all the arts, even that of war. While the nations of Europe become more refined every day, these people remain in a state of primitive ignorance; and rarely think of employing new inventions¹ in war, until they have been used against them a thousand times.

They have no experience of the sea, nor skill in naval affairs. They say that a mere handful of Christians, descending from a barren² rock, terrify the Ottomans, and shake their ascendancy.

Although they are themselves unfit for

¹ That is to say, the new inventions of the European nations.

² These are, apparently, the Knights of Malta.—(M.)

PERSIAN LETTERS

commerce, it is with great reluctance that they allow the Europeans, always industrious and enterprising, to conduct their trade: they think they are conferring a favour on these strangers in permitting them to enrich themselves.

Throughout the wide stretch of country which I have crossed, Smyrna is the only town which can be regarded as rich and powerful; and Smyrna owes its prosperity to the Europeans: it is no fault of the Turks that it is not like all the others.

Here you have, my dear Rustan, a correct idea of this empire, which will be within two centuries the scene of some conqueror's exploits.

Smyrna, the 2nd of the moon of
Rhamazan,¹ 1711.

LETTER XX

*Usbek to his wife Zachi, at the Seraglio
at Ispahan*

YOU have offended me, Zachi; and my emotions are such as you should dread,

¹ More correctly, *Ramazan*, the ninth month of the Persian year; the Mohammedan Lent.

did not my distance from you afford you time to change your conduct, and set at rest the fierce jealousy with which I am tormented.

I learn that you have been found alone with Nadir, the white eunuch, who will pay with his head for his infidelity and treachery. How could you forget yourself so far as not to feel that it is forbidden you to receive a white eunuch in your chamber, as long as you have black ones at your service? You have been careful to tell me that eunuchs are not men, and that your virtue raises you above those thoughts which an imperfect likeness might arouse. That is not enough either for you or for me: not enough for you, because you have done that which the laws of the seraglio forbid; not enough for me, inasmuch as you have robbed me of honour, in exposing yourself to the gaze—what do I say?—perhaps to the attempts of a traitor who would have defiled you by his misdeeds, and still more by his repining and his impotent despair. You will doubtless tell me that you have always been faithful. Yes, but how could you fail to be? Could

PERSIAN LETTERS

you possibly deceive the vigilance of the black eunuchs, who are so amazed at the life you lead? Do you think you could force the doors that keep you from the world? You boast of a virtue which is not free; and perhaps your impure desires have robbed you again and again of the merit and the worth of your vaunted fidelity.

I am persuaded that you are not guilty of all that might be laid to your charge: that the traitor did not lay his sacrilegious hands upon you; that you were not so prodigal as to expose to him the delights of his master; that, covered with your garments, you allowed at least that barrier to remain between you; that he, struck with reverent awe, cast down his eyes; and that, his hardihood forsaking him, he trembled at the prospect of the punishment he had incurred. All this granted, it is none the less true that you have failed in your duty. And, since you have done a gratuitous wrong, without accomplishing your sinful desires, what would you not do to satisfy them? Still more, what would you do if you could escape from that sacred

place which seems to you a melancholy prison, but which your companions find a happy asylum against the attacks of vice, a consecrated temple where their sex loses its weakness, and becomes invincible in spite of all its natural disadvantages? What would you do if, left to yourself, you had no other defence than your love for me, which is so sadly shaken, and your duty, against which you have so unworthily sinned? How immaculate are the manners of the country in which you live! They protect you from the attempts of the vilest slaves! You ought to be grateful to me even for the constraint in which you live, since it is that alone which makes you worthy of life.

You cannot endure the chief of the eunuchs, because he is for ever watching your behaviour, and giving you good advice. His ugliness, you say, is so horrible that you cannot look at him without suffering. As if one would place in posts of that kind, miracles of manly beauty! No; what annoys you is that you have not in his place the white eunuch who dishonours you.

But what has your chief slave done to

PERSIAN LETTERS

you? He has told you that the familiarities which you have taken with the youthful Zelida were unbecoming: that is the cause of your hatred.

Duty requires me, Zachi, to be an impartial judge; I am, however, only a kind husband who seeks to find you innocent. The love which I bear Roxana, my new wife, has not deprived me of the tenderness which is rightly due to you, as being not less beautiful than she. I share my love among you all; and the only advantage possessed by Roxana is that which virtue adds to beauty.

Smyrna, the 12th of the moon of
Zilcade,¹ 1711.

LETTER XXI

Usbek to the chief white Eunuch

WHEN you open this letter you ought to tremble; or rather you should have trembled when you permitted the treachery of Nadir. You who, even in the dulness and frigidity

¹ More correctly, *Zilkuiz*, the eleventh month of the Persian year.

of old age, may not without guilt raise your eyes towards the dread objects of my love ; you, to whom it is for ever forbidden to set a sacrilegious foot across the threshold of that awful place which conceals them from every eye : it is you who permit in those, for whose conduct you are responsible, liberties which you would not yourself dare to take ; and do you not quake at the anticipation of the thunderbolt about to fall upon them and you ?

And what are you but vile instruments whom I may destroy at my pleasure ; whose existence depends upon obedience ; who have been sent into the world to live under my laws, or to die when I require it ; who will cease to breathe as soon as my happiness, my love, my jealousy, has no more need of your ignoble service ; who, in fine, can have no other lot than submission, whose soul is my will, whose only hope begins and ends in pleasing me ?

I am aware that some of my wives are very fretful under the strict laws of duty ; that the constant presence of a black eunuch annoys them ; that they are weary of those hideous objects, which are appointed to keep

PERSIAN LETTERS

them spotless for their husband ; I know it well. As for you, who have abetted this disorder, you shall be punished in a manner to strike terror into all those who abuse my confidence.

I swear by all the prophets in heaven,¹ and by Hali, the greatest of them, that if you swerve from your duty, I will hold your life of no more account than that of the insects which I tread upon.

Smyrna, the 12th of the moon of
Zilcade, 1711.

LETTER XXII²

Jaron to the first Eunuch

THE further Usbek journeys from the seraglio, the more he thinks of these devoted women : he sighs ; he weeps ; his grief becomes embittered, and his suspicions grow stronger. He wishes to increase the number of their guardians. He intends to send me back, with all the blacks who

¹ According to the Persians there are a hundred thousand prophets. (See Letter XLI.)

² The second of those added in 1754.

LETTER XXII

accompany him. It is not for himself he fears, but for that which is to him a thousand times dearer.

I return then to live under your laws, and to share your cares. Great God ! what a world of things is necessary for one man's happiness !

Nature, which seems originally to have placed women in a state of dependence, afterwards withdrew them from it, with the result that dissension arose between the sexes because of their mutual rights. The sexes now live in a new kind of unity : hatred is the link between women and us poor eunuchs ; between women and men, love is the bond.

My brow begins to wear a constant frown. My eyes dart forth sombre glances, and joy forsakes my lips. Outwardly I appear calm ; within unrest reigns. Grief will furrow my face long before the wrinkles of old age appear.

I should have greatly enjoyed accompanying my master in his western journey, but my will belongs to him. He wishes me to guard his wives ; I shall watch over them faithfully. I know how to behave

PERSIAN LETTERS

towards that sex, which, when not allowed to be vain, turns haughty, and which it is easier to break than to bend. I prostrate myself before you.

Smyrna, the 12th of the moon of
Zilcade, 1711.

LETTER XXIII

Usbek to his friend Ibben, at Smyrna

WE have now arrived at Leghorn after a forty days' voyage. It is a new town and bears witness to the genius of the dukes of Tuscany, who, from a marshy village, have made it the most flourishing town in Italy.

The women here enjoy much liberty: they are allowed to look at men through a species of window called *jalousie*: they have permission to go out every day in the company of some old women: they wear only one veil.¹ Their brothers-in-law, their uncles, and their nephews, are allowed to visit them, and this hardly ever troubles their husbands.

¹ The Persian women wear four.—(M.)

LETTER XXIV

The first sight of a Christian town is, for a Mohammedan, a wonderful spectacle. I do not mean only those things that strike the eye at once, such as the difference in the buildings, the dresses, and the chief customs: there is, even in the merest trifles, a singularity, which I feel, but cannot describe.

We set out to-morrow for Marseilles, where our sojourn will be brief. Rica's intention and mine is to get at once to Paris, the capital of the European empire. Travellers are always anxious to visit great cities, because they are a sort of common country to all strangers. Farewell. Rest assured that I shall never cease to love you.

Leghorn, the 12th of the moon of
Saphar, 1712.

LETTER XXIV

Rica to Ibben, at Smyrna

We have now been a month at Paris, and all the time constantly moving about. There is much to do before one can get

PERSIAN LETTERS

settled, find out the people with whom one has business, and procure the many requisites which are all wanted at the same time.

Paris is quite as large as Ispahan. The houses are so high that you would swear they must be inhabited by astrologers. You can easily imagine that a city built in the air, with six or seven houses one above the other, is densely peopled; and that when everybody is abroad, there is a mighty bustle.

You will scarcely believe that during the month I have been here I have not yet seen any one walking. There is no people in the world who hold more by their vehicles than the French: they run; they fly: the slow carriages of Asia, the measured step of our camels, would put them into a state of coma. As for me, who am not made for such hurry, and who often go a-foot without changing my pace, I am sometimes as mad as a Christian; for, passing over splashing from head to foot, I cannot pardon the elbowings I meet with regularly and periodically. A man, coming up behind me, passes me, and turns me half

round ; then another, crossing me on the opposite side, spins me suddenly round to my first position. Before I have walked a hundred paces, I am more bruised than if I had gone ten leagues.

You must not yet expect from me an exhaustive account of the manners and customs of the Europeans : I have myself but a faint notion of them yet, and have hardly had time to recover from my astonishment.

The King of France¹ is the most powerful of European potentates. He has no mines of gold like his neighbour, the King of Spain ; but he is much wealthier than that prince, because his riches are drawn from a more inexhaustible source, the vanity of his subjects. He has undertaken and carried on great wars, without any other supplies than those derived from the sale of titles of honour ; and it is by a prodigy of human pride that his troops are paid, his towns fortified, and his fleets equipped.

Then again, the king is a great magician, for his dominion extends to the minds of his subjects ; he makes them think what he wishes. If he has only a million crowns

¹ Louis XIV.

PERSIAN LETTERS

in his exchequer, and has need of two millions, he has only to persuade them that one crown is worth two, and they believe it.¹ If he has a costly war on hand, and is short of money, he simply suggests to his subjects that a piece of paper is coin of the realm, and they are straightway convinced of it. He has even succeeded in persuading them that his touch is a sovereign cure for all sorts of diseases, so great is the power and influence he has over their minds.

What I have told you of this prince need not astonish you: there is another magician more powerful still, who is master of the king's mind, as absolutely as the king is master of the minds of his subjects. This magician is called the Pope. Sometimes he makes the king believe that three are no more than one; that the bread which he eats is not bread; the wine which he drinks not wine; and a thousand things of a like nature.

¹ The French kings regarded money as a mere symbol, the value of which they could raise or lower at their pleasure. "Kings treat men as they do pieces of money; they give them what value they choose, and people are forced to accept them according to their currency, and not according to their true worth."—LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

LETTER XXIV

And, to keep him in practice, and prevent him from losing the habit of belief, he gives him, now and again, as an exercise, certain articles of faith. Some two years ago he sent him a large document which he called *Constitution*,¹ and wished to enforce belief in all that it contained upon this prince and his subjects under heavy penalties. He succeeded in the case of the king,² who set the example of immediate submission; but some of his subjects revolted, and declared that they would not believe a single word of what was contained in this document. The women are the prime movers in this rebellion, which divides the court, the kingdom, and every family in the land, because the document prohibits them from reading a book which all the Christians assert is of divine origin: it is, indeed, their Koran. The women, enraged at this affront to their sex, exert

¹ An anachronism. The date of this letter is 1712, but the Bull *Unigenitus*, which, under the name of the "Constitution," troubled France during the greater part of the eighteenth century, was not issued till 1713.

² Louis XIV. submitted the more readily because he required the Pope's aid to terminate the theological quarrels which had become insufferable to him.

PERSIAN LETTERS

all their power against the *Constitution*; and they have brought over to their side all the men who are not anxious about their privilege in the matter. And truly, the Mufti does not reason amiss. By the great Hali! he must have been instructed in the principles of our holy religion, because, since women are inferior creatures compared to us, and may not, according to our prophets, enter into Paradise, why should they meddle with a book which is only designed to teach the way thither?

Some things of a miraculous nature have been told me of the king, which I am certain will appear to you hardly credible.

It is said, that, while he was making war against such of his neighbours as had leagued against him, there were in his kingdom an infinite number of invisible foes surrounding him on all sides.¹ They add, that, during a thirty years' search, in spite of the indefatigable exertions of certain dervishes who are in his confidence,² not one of these have ever been

¹ The Jansenists.

² The Jesuits.

LETTER XXIV

discovered. They live with him, in his court and in his capital, among his troops, among his legislators; and yet it is believed that he will have the mortification of dying without having discovered them. They exist, as it were, in general, but not in particular: they constitute a body without members. Beyond a doubt, heaven wishes to punish this prince for his severity to the vanquished, in afflicting him with invisible enemies of a spirit and a destiny superior to his own.

I will continue to write you, and acquaint you with matters differing widely from the Persian character and genius. We tread, indeed, the same earth; but it seems incredible, remembering in the presence of the men of this country those of the country in which you are.

Paris, the 4th of the second moon of
Rebiab,¹ 1712.

¹ *Rabi-ul-sani*, the second month of spring, and fourth of the Persian year.

PERSIAN LETTERS

LETTER XXV

Usbek to Ibben, at Smyrna

I HAVE received a letter from your nephew, Rhedi, in which he informs me that he has left Smyrna intending to visit Italy; and that the sole object of his voyage is to improve himself, and so render himself worthier of you. I congratulate you on having a nephew who will some day be the consolation of your old age.

Rica tells me he wrote you a long letter full of details about this country. The liveliness of his intellect makes him a keen observer: I, whose mind moves slowly, am in no case to write of anything.

We often speak of you with warm affection; and are never done recalling the welcome you gave us in Smyrna, and the services your friendship rendered us daily. May you, generous Ibben, find friends everywhere as grateful and as faithful as we are!

I hope to see you soon again, and to enjoy once more those happy days which

LETTER XXVI

pass so pleasantly between two friends.
Farewell.

Paris, the 4th of the second moon of
Rebiab, 1712.

LETTER XXVI

Usbek to Roxana, at the Seraglio at Ispahan

HOW happy you are, Roxana, to be in the delightful country of Persia, and not in these poisoned regions, where shame and virtue are alike unknown! How happy, indeed! In my seraglio you live as in the abode of innocence, inaccessible to the attacks of all mankind; you rejoice in the good fortune which makes it impossible for you to fall; no man has ever sullied you with a lascivious look; your father-in-law himself, even during the licence of the festivals, has never beheld your lovely mouth, for you have never neglected to conceal it with a sacred veil. Happy Roxana! In your visits to the country, eunuchs have always walked before you to deal out death to all those who dared to look at you. As for me, who received you

PERSIAN LETTERS

as a gift from heaven to increase my happiness, what trouble did I not have in entering upon the possession of that treasure which you defended with such constancy! How I was mortified, during the first days of our marriage, when you withheld yourself from my sight! How impatient I was, when I did see you! You refused to satisfy my eager longing; on the contrary, you increased it by the obstinate refusals of an alarmed modesty: you failed to distinguish between me and all other men from whom you always conceal yourself. Do you remember that day when I lost you among your slaves, who betrayed me, and baffled me in my search? Or that other time, when, finding your tears powerless, you employed your mother's authority to stay the eagerness of my love? Do you remember when all your resources failed, except those which your courage supplied? Seeing a dagger, you threatened to destroy a husband who loved you, if he continued to demand the sacrifice of what was dearer to you than your husband himself. Two months passed in this combat between love and modesty; and you carried your chaste

LETTER XXVI

scruples so far, that you did not submit even after you were conquered, but defended to the last gasp a dying virginity. You regarded me as an enemy who had outraged you, and not as a husband who loved you. It was more than three months before you could look at me without blushing; your bashful glance seemed to reproach me for the advantage I had taken. I did not even enjoy a quiet possession; to the best of your ability you robbed me of your charms and graces; and without having received the least favours, I was ravished with the greatest.

If you had been brought up in this country, you would not have been so put about. The women here have lost all reserve: they appear before the men with their faces uncovered, as if they sought their overthrow; they watch for their glances; they accompany them to their mosques, on their promenades, even to their rooms: the service of eunuchs is quite unknown to them. In place of that noble simplicity, that amiable modesty which reigns among you, a brute-like impudence prevails, to which one can never grow accustomed.

PERSIAN LETTERS

Yes, Roxana, were you here, you would feel yourself outraged at the dreadful ignominy in which your sex is plunged; you would fly from this abominable land, sighing for that sweet retreat, where you find innocence and self-security, where no danger makes you afraid; where, in short, you can love me, without fear of ever losing that love which it is your duty to feel for me.

When you heighten the brilliance of your complexion with the loveliest colour, when you perfume your whole body with the most precious essences, when you clothe yourself in your most beautiful garments, when you seek to distinguish yourself from your companions by your gracefulness in the dance, and the sweetness of your song, as you gently dispute with them in beauty, in tenderness, in vivacity, I cannot imagine that you have any other aim than to please me; and, when I see you blushing modestly as your eyes seek mine, as you wind yourself into my heart with soft and flattering words, I cannot, Roxana, suspect your love.

But what am I to think of the women of

Europe? The artful composition of their complexion, the ornaments with which they deck themselves, the care they have of their bodies, the desire to please which occupies them continually, are so many stains on their virtue, and affronts to their husbands.

It is not, Roxana, that I believe they carry their encroachment on virtue as far as such conduct might be expected to lead them, or that their debauchery extends to such horrible excess as the absolute violation of their conjugal vow—a thought to make one tremble. There are very few women so abandoned as to go that length: the hearts of all of them are engraved from their birth with an impression of virtue, which education weakens, but cannot destroy. Though they may be lax in the observation of the external duties which modesty requires; yet, when it is a question of the last step, their better nature revolts. And so, when we imprison you so closely, and have you watched by crowds of slaves, when we restrain your desires so forcibly lest they break beyond bounds; it is not because we fear the final deed of infidelity, but because we know that purity cannot be

PERSIAN LETTERS

too immaculate, and that the slightest stain would soil it.

I pity you, Roxana. Your long-tried chastity deserves a husband who would never have left you, and who would himself have restrained those desires which without him your virtue must subdue.

Paris, the 7th of the moon of Regeb,¹ 1712.

LETTER XXVII

Usbek to Nessir, at Ispahan

WE are now at Paris, that proud rival of the city of the sun.²

When I left Smyrna, I commissioned my friend Ibben to forward to you a box, containing some presents for you, which you will receive along with this letter. Although I am five or six hundred leagues distant from him, we exchange news as easily as if he were at Ispahan and I at Koum. I send my letters to Marscilles, whence vessels are constantly sailing for Smyrna: from Smyrna he despatches those destined for

¹ More correctly, *Rejab*, the seventh month of the Persian year.

² Ispahan.—(M.)

LETTER XXVII

Persia by the Armenian caravans which start every day for Ispahan.

Rica enjoys the best of health: the strength of his constitution, his youth, and his natural gaiety enable him to pass unhurt through every ordeal.

I, however, am far from well; depressed both in body and mind, I surrender myself to reflections which become daily more melancholy. My impaired health makes me long for my own land, and adds to the strangeness of this one.

But I conjure you, dear Nessim, on no account to let my wives know how depressed I am. If they love me, I would spare their tears; and if not, I have no desire to increase their frowardness.

If my eunuchs believed me in danger, if they dared to hope that a base compliance would pass unpunished, they would soon cease to be deaf to the seductive voice of that sex, which can melt rocks, and move inanimate things.

Farewell, Nessim. It is a great happiness to me that I can confide in you.

Paris, the 5th of the moon of
Chahban, 1712.

PERSIAN LETTERS

LETTER XXVIII

*Rica to * * **

YESTERDAY I witnessed a most remarkable thing, although it is of daily occurrence in Paris.

In the evening, after dinner, all the people gather together and play at a sort of dramatic game, which I have heard them call comedy. The main performance takes place upon a platform which is called the theatre.¹ On both sides may be seen in little nooks called boxes, men and women who perform in dumb show, something after our own style in Persia.

Here you see a languishing love-sick lady; there, a more animated dame exchanges burning glances with her lover: their faces portray every passion, and express them with an eloquence, none the less

¹ "Come on, and let us get a seat on the theatre. - On the theatre, replied my Siamese; you're joking. We are not going to perform, we come to look on. - No matter, I said, let us go and loll there. We shall see nothing, and hear badly; but it is the most expensive, and consequently the most honourable place." - DUFRESNY'S *Amusements sérieux et comiques*, chap. v.

LETTER XXVIII

fervid because it is mute. The actresses here display only half their bodies, and usually wear a modest muff to hide their arms. In the lower part of the theatre there stands a crowd of people who ridicule those who are seated on high; the latter, in their turn, laugh at those who are below.

But the most zealous and active of all are certain people whose youth enables them to support fatigue. They are obliged to appear everywhere; they move through passages known only to them, mounting with surprising agility from storey to storey; now above, now below, they visit every box. They dive, so to speak; are lost, and reappear; often they leave the place of performance, and carry on the game in another. And there are some who, by a miracle one would hardly have expected from the fact that they carry crutches, perform prodigies similar to those I have described. Lastly, there are the rooms where a private comedy is played. Commencing with salutations, the performers proceed to embrace each other: I am told that the slightest acquaintance

PERSIAN LETTERS

gives a man a right to squeeze another to death. The place seems to inspire tenderness. Indeed, it is said that the princesses who reign here are far from cruel; and, with the exception of two or three hours during the day in which they are sufficiently hard-hearted, it must be admitted that they are uniformly very tractable, their hard-heartedness being a species of frenzy, which goes as easily as it comes.

All this that I have described goes on in much the same style at another place called the Opera: the sole difference being, that they speak at the one, and sing at the other. One of my friends took me the other day to a box where one of the principal actresses was undressing. We became so well acquainted, that next morning I received the following letter from her:

“SIR,—I, who have always been the most virtuous actress at the Opera, am yet the most miserable woman in the world. About seven or eight months ago, while I was in the box where you saw me yesterday, and in the act of dressing myself as priestess of Diana, a young Abbé broke in upon me.

LETTER XXVIII

Undismayed by my white robe, my veil, and my frontlet, he stole from me my innocence. I have tried to persuade him of the greatness of the sacrifice I made; but he mocks me, and maintains that he found me very profane. In the meantime my pregnancy is so apparent, that I dare not show myself upon the stage; for I am, in the matter of honour, extremely delicate, and always insist that it is easier for a well-born woman to lose her virtue than her modesty. You will readily believe that the young Abbé would never have overcome such exquisite modesty, had he not given me a promise of marriage. Having such a good reason to do so, I overlooked the usual petty formalities, and began where I should have ended. But, since I am dishonoured by his faithlessness, I do not wish to remain longer at the Opera, where, between you and me, they scarcely give me enough for a livelihood; because now, as I grow older, and, on the one hand, begin to lose my charms, on the other, my salary, which remains stationary, seems to grow less and less every day. I have learned from a member of your suite, that, in your

PERSIAN LETTERS

country, they cannot make enough of a good dancer; and that, if I were once at Ispahan, I would quickly realise a fortune. If you would deign to take me under your protection, and carry me with you to your country, you would do yourself the credit of aiding a woman, whose virtuous behaviour renders her not altogether unworthy of your good offices. I am . . ."

Paris, the 2nd of the moon of
Chalval,¹ 1712.

LETTER XXIX

Rica to Ibben, at Smyrna

THE Pope is the head of the Christians: an old idol, kept venerable by custom. Formerly he was feared even by princes; for he deposed them as easily as our glorious sultans depose the kings of Irimetta and Georgia. He is, however, no longer dreaded. He declares himself to be the successor of one of the first Christians, called Saint Peter: and it is certainly a

¹ More correctly, *Shawal*, the tenth month of the Persian year.

rich succession ; for he possesses immense treasures, and a large territory owns his sway.

The bishops are the administrators under his rule, and they exercise, as his subordinates, two very different functions. In their corporate capacity they have, like him, the right to make articles of faith. Individually, their sole duty is to dispense with the observance of these articles. For you must know that the Christian religion is burdened with an immense number of very tedious duties : and, as it is universally considered less easy to fulfil these than to have bishops who can dispense with their fulfilment, the latter method has been chosen for the benefit of the public. Thus, if any one wishes to escape the fast of Rhamazan,¹ or is unwilling to submit to the formalities of marriage, or wishes to break his vows, or to marry within the prescribed degrees, or even to forswear himself, all he has to do is to apply to a bishop, or to the Pope, who will at once grant a dispensation.

The bishops do not make articles of faith for their own government. There are a

¹ Lent.

PERSIAN LETTERS

very great number of learned men, for the most part dervishes,¹ who raise new questions in religion among themselves: they are left to discuss them for a long time, and the dispute lasts until a decision terminates it.

I can also assure you that there never was a realm in which so many civil wars have broken out, as in the kingdom of Christ.

Those who first propound some new doctrine, are immediately called heretics. Each heresy receives a name which is the rallying cry of those who support it. But no one need be a heretic against his will: he only requires to split the difference, and allege some scholastic subtlety to those who accuse him of heresy; and, whether it be intelligible or not, that renders him as pure as the snow, and he may insist upon his being called orthodox.

What I have told you holds good only in France and Germany: for I have heard it affirmed that in Spain and Portugal there are certain dervishes who do not understand

¹ Applied by Montesquieu's Persians to the friars, especially to the Jesuits.

LETTER XXIX

raillery, and who cause men to be burned as they would burn straw. Happy the man, who, when he falls into the hands of these people, has been accustomed to finger little balls of wood¹ while saying his prayers, who has carried on his person two pieces of cloth attached to two ribbons,² and who has paid a visit to a province called Galicia.³ Without that, a poor devil is in a wretched plight. Although he should swear like a Pagan that he is orthodox, they may very likely decline to admit his plea, and burn him for a heretic. Much good his scholastic subtlety will do him! They will none of it; he will be burned to ashes before they would dream of even giving him a hearing.

Other judges assume the innocence of the accused; these always deem them guilty. In dubious cases, their rule is to lean to the side of severity, apparently because they think mankind desperately wicked. And yet, when it suits them, they have such a high opinion of mankind, that they think them incapable of lying; for they accept

¹ A rosary.

² A scapulary.

³ The pilgrimage to Saint James of Compostella.

PERSIAN LETTERS

as witnesses, mortal enemies, loose women, and people whose trade is infamous. In sentencing culprits, they pay them a little compliment. Having dressed them in brimstone shirts, they assure them that they are much grieved to see them in such sorry attire; that they are tender-hearted, abhorring bloodshed, and are quite overcome at having to condemn them. Then these heart-broken judges console themselves by confiscating to their own use all the goods of their miserable victims.

Oh, happy land, inhabited by the children of the prophets! There such woeful sights as these are unknown.¹ There, the holy religion which angels brought protects itself by its innate truth; it can maintain itself without recourse to violent means like these.

Paris, the 4th of the moon of
Chalval, 1712.

¹ The Persians are the most tolerant of all the Mohammedans.—(M.)

LETTER XXX

LETTER XXX

Rica to the Same, at Smyrna

THE curiosity of the people of Paris exceeds all bounds. When I arrived, they stared at me as if I had dropped from the sky: old and young, men, women, and children, were all agog to see me. If I went abroad, everybody flew to the window. If I visited the Tuileries, I was immediately surrounded by a circle of gazers, the women forming a rainbow woven of a thousand colours. When I went sight-seeing, a hundred lorgnettes were speedily levelled at me: in fact, never was a man so stared at as I have been. I smiled frequently when I heard people who had never travelled beyond their own door, saying to each other, "He certainly looks very like a Persian." One thing struck me: I found my portraits everywhere—in all the shops, on every mantelpiece—so fearful were they lest they should not see enough of me.

So much distinction could not fail to be burdensome. I do not consider myself such a rare and wonderful specimen of

PERSIAN LETTERS

humanity ; and although I have a very good opinion of myself, I would never have dreamt that I could have disturbed the peace of a great city, where I was quite unknown. I therefore resolved to change my Persian dress for a European one, in order to see if my countenance would still strike people as wonderful. This experiment made me acquainted with my true value. Divested of everything foreign in my garb, I found myself estimated at my proper rate. I had reason to complain of my tailor, who had made me lose so suddenly the attention and good opinion of the public ; for I sank immediately into the merest nonentity. Sometimes I would be as much as an hour in a given company, without attracting the least notice, or having an opportunity given me to speak ; but, if any one chanced to inform the company that I was a Persian, I soon overheard a murmur all round me, " Oh ! ah ! a Persian, is he ? Most amazing ! However can anybody be a Persian ? "

Paris, the 6th of the moon of
Chalval, 1712.

LETTER XXXI

LETTER XXXI

Rhedi to Usbek, at Paris

I AM at present, my dear Usbek, at Venice. Although one had seen all the cities of the world, there would still be a surprise in store for him here. The sight of a town whose towers and mosques rise out of the water, and of an innumerable throng of people where one would expect to find only fish, will always excite astonishment.

But this heathenish city lacks the most precious treasure the world holds, pure water, to wit; it is impossible to accomplish a single lawful ablution. The place is held in abomination by our holy Prophet; he never beholds it from on high but with indignation. With that exception, my dear Usbek, I would be delighted to live in a town where my mind is developed every day. I am gaining an understanding of the secrets of commerce, of the affairs of princes, and of their form of government. Nor do I neglect European superstitions; I apply myself to medicine, physics, and

PERSIAN LETTERS

astronomy ; I study the arts : in short, I am couching my eyes of the film which covered them in my native land.

Venice, the 16th of the moon of
Chalval, 1712.

LETTER XXXII

*Rica to * * **

I WENT the other day to look through a house where a meagre provision is made for some three hundred people.¹ I was not long about it ; for the church and the buildings do not deserve much attention. Those who live in this establishment were quite cheerful ; many of them played at cards, or other games of which I knew nothing. As I left, one of the residents left also ; and having heard me ask the way to the Marais, the remotest district of Paris, " I am going there," said he, " and will conduct you ; follow me." He guided me wonderfully,

¹ The almshouse of the " Quinze-Vingts," founded at Paris, in 1254, by Saint Louis, on his return from Palestine, for three hundred knights whose eyes had been put out by the Saracens.

LETTER XXXIII

steered me through the crowds, and protected me dexterously from carriages and coaches. We had almost arrived, when curiosity got the better of me. "My good friend," I said, "may I not know who you are?" "I am blind, sir," he answered. "What!" I cried; "blind? Then why did you not ask the good fellow who was playing at cards with you to be our guide?" "He is blind, too," was the answer: "for four hundred years there have been three hundred blind folks in the house where you met me. But I must leave you. There is the street you want. I am going with the crowd into that church, where, I promise you, people will be less in my way than I will be in theirs."

Paris, the 17th of the moon of
Chalval, 1712.

LETTER XXXIII

Usbek to Rhedi, at Venice

WINE is so very dear in Paris, on account of the duties laid on it, that it seems as if there were an intention to fulfil the

PERSIAN LETTERS

injunctions of the divine Koran, which prohibits the use of strong drink.

When I consider the disastrous effects of that liquor, I cannot help regarding it as the most baleful of nature's gifts to men. If there is one thing that has soiled the lives and the good fame of our monarchs, it has been intemperance ; that is the chief and vilest source of their injustice and cruelty.

To the shame of these men it must be said, that, though the law prohibits them from using wine, they drink it to an excess which degrades them beneath the lowest of mankind. Here, however, the princes are allowed to use it, and no one has ever observed that it has caused them to do wrong. The human mind is inconsistency itself. In a drunken debauch, men break out madly against all precept ; and the law, intended to make for our righteousness, often serves only to increase our guilt.

But, when I disapprove of the use of this liquor which deprives men of their reason, I do not also condemn those beverages which exhilarate the mind. The wisdom

of the Orientals shows itself in their search for remedies against melancholy, which they prosecute with as much solicitude as in the case of the most dangerous maladies. When any misfortune happens to a European, his only resource is to read a philosopher called Seneca ; but we Asiatics, more sensible, and better physicians in this matter, drink an infusion which cheers the heart and charms away the memory of its sufferings.

There is no greater affliction than those consolations which are drawn from the necessity of evil, the inefficacy of remedies, the inevitableness of destiny, the dispensations of Providence, and the wretched state of mankind generally. It is mockery to think of lightening misfortune, by remembering that we are born to misery ; it is much wiser to raise the mind above these reflections, to treat man as a being capable of feeling, and not as a mere reasoner.

The soul, while united to the body, is a slave under a tyrant. If the blood moves sluggishly, if our spirits are not light enough, or high enough, we fall into dejection, and grow melancholy ; but, if we

PERSIAN LETTERS

drink what has the power to change the disposition of our body, our soul becomes capable of receiving delightful impressions, and experiences an inward joy as its machine recovers, so to speak, life and motion.

Paris, the 25th of the moon of
Zilcade, 1713.

LETTER XXXIV

Usbek to Ibben, at Smyrna

THE Persian women are finer than the French women; but those of France are prettier. It is as difficult not to love the former, as it is to be displeased with the latter: these attract by their tenderness and modesty, while those conquer us with their sprightly humour.

That which preserves the beauty of the women in Persia is the regular life they lead: they neither gamble, nor sit up late; they drink no wine, and are never exposed to the air. It must indeed be admitted that the life of the seraglio is more conducive to health than to happiness, it is so dull

LETTER XXXIV

and uniform. Everything turns upon discipline and duty; the very pleasures are solemn, and mirth itself is sad; enjoyment is hardly ever tasted except as an indication of authority and dependence.

Even the men are not so cheerful in Persia as in France: one never sees that freedom of spirit, and that air of contentment, which I find here among all sorts and conditions of men.

It is still worse in Turkey. There, families may be found, in which, from father to son, no soul has laughed since the foundation of the monarchy.

This Asiatic gravity is the result of the unsocial life which people lead: they never see each other except on ceremonial occasions. Friendship, that dear solace of the heart, the sweetener of our life below, is almost unknown to them; they withdraw into their houses, where they always have the same companions; and in this way each family is, as it were, isolated.

One day, when I was discussing the subject with a young man of this country, he said, "That which offends me most

PERSIAN LETTERS

among your customs is the necessity you are under of living with slaves, whose thoughts and inclinations are always subdued to the vileness of their condition. These wretched creatures, by whom you have been beset from infancy, weaken in you, and ultimately destroy, those virtuous feelings which nature implants.

“For, in short, when you have cleared your mind from prejudice, what is to be expected from an upbringing at the hands of a wretch, who makes his honour consistent with the guardianship of another’s wives, and prides himself upon the most loathsome employment which society affords; whose only virtue, his fidelity, is utterly despicable, because it is prompted by envy, jealousy, and despair; who, belonging to neither sex, burns to be avenged on both, and yet submits to the tyranny of the stronger, in order that he may afflict the weaker; who, deriving from his imperfection, his ugliness, and his deformity, all the *éclat* of his position, is esteemed only because he is unworthy; who, finally, riveted for ever to the gate which he guards, harder than the bolts and bars

LETTER XXXV

which secure it, brags of fifty years in this ignoble station, where, as the minister of his master's jealousy, he has given the rein to all his own vileness ? ”

Paris, the 14th of the moon of
Zilhage,¹ 1713.

LETTER XXXV

*Usbek to Gemchid, his Cousin, Dervish of the
glorious Monastery of Tauris*

WHAT is your opinion, sublime dervish, of the Christians ? Do you think that at the day of judgment, like the unbelieving Turks, who are to serve the Jews for asses, they will be hurried off at the gallop into hell ? I am well aware that their abode will not be with the prophets, and that the great Hali's mission was not to them. But, do you think they will be condemned to everlasting punishment because they have not been fortunate enough to find mosques in their country ? Will God chastise them for failing to practise a religion which He

¹ More correctly, Zil Haj, the last month of the Persian year.

PERSIAN LETTERS

has withheld from their knowledge? I may tell you, I have often examined these Christians; I have questioned them to find out if they had any idea about the great Hali, who was the most perfect of all men, and it is certain that they have never even heard of him.

They are not like those infidels whom our holy prophets put to the sword, because they refused to believe in the miracles of Heaven: they are like those unfortunates who lived in the darkness of idolatry, before the divine light illumined the face of our great prophet.

Besides, an examination of their religion reveals the presence of some rudiments of our doctrines. I have often admired the secret workings of Providence, which seems in this way to have prepared them for a general conversion. One book of their learned men, entitled "Polygamy Triumphant,"¹ of which I have heard, proves

¹ The full title of the book to which Usbek alludes is, "*Polygamia triumphatrix, id est discursus politicus de polygamia, auctore Theophilo Aletheo, cum notis Athanasii Vincentii, omnibus antipolygamiis, ubique locorum, terrarum, insularum, pagorum, urbium, modeste et pie opposita.*" It was printed in Holland, probably

that polygamy is enjoined upon Christians. Their baptism is an emblem of our ablutions; and their only error consists in ascribing to that first ablution an efficacy which enables them to omit all others. Their priests and friars pray, like ours, seven times a day. They hope to inherit a paradise where, by means of the resurrection of the body, they will enjoy a thousand delights. Like us also, they have appointed fasts, and times of mortification, by which they hope to move the divine clemency. They worship good angels, and are in dread of evil ones. They believe in miracles which God works by means of His servants. They recognise, as we do, their own unworthiness, and the need they have for an intercessor with God. Throughout their religion I find traces of Moham-medanism, although there is no word of Mohammed. It has been well said, that truth will break through the darkest clouds. The day is hastening when the Eternal in Amsterdam, although the name of a Swedish town appears on the title-page. Had it not suited Montesquieu's purpose to refer to it, the very name of the book would now be unknown except to a few specialists, as it is dull and uninteresting.

PERSIAN LETTERS

find a warm reception; and, indeed, I believe that this extreme zeal for the reputation of the dead, would blaze up to some purpose in defence of the living. But, however that may be," added I, "God keep me from ever drawing on myself the enmity of these censors of this poet, who has not been saved from their implacable hate even after having lain two thousand years in his grave! At present they fight the air; but how would it be, if their rage were animated by the presence of an enemy?"

Those of whom I have told you dispute in the vulgar tongue; and must be distinguished from another set of disputants, who employ a barbarous language,¹ which seems to increase the fury and the obstinacy of the combatants. There are places² where these people are to be seen struggling as in a battle, dismal and confused; they are fed upon subtleties, they live upon obscure arguments and false inferences. This profession, although one would think its followers would die of hunger, must pay

¹ The Latin of the schools.

² The Sorbonne and the University.

LETTER XXXVII

in some way. A whole nation, driven from their own country,¹ has been seen to cross the sea and establish itself in France, carrying with it no other means of providing for the necessities of life, than a notable talent for debate. Farewell.

Paris, the last day of the moon of
Zilhage, 1713.

LETTER XXXVII

Usbek to Ibben, at Smyrna

THE King of France is old.² We have no examples in our histories of such a long reign as his. It is said that he possesses in a very high degree the faculty of making himself obeyed: he governs with equal ability his family, his court, and his kingdom: he has often been heard to say, that, of all existing governments, that of the Turks, or that of our august Sultan, pleased

¹ An allusion to a seminary of Irish priests instituted in 1677 by some refugees.

² Louis XIV. was then seventy-five years old, and had reigned for seventy.

PERSIAN LETTERS

him best: such is his high opinion of Oriental statecraft.¹

I have studied his character, and I have found certain contradictions which I cannot reconcile. For example, he has a minister who is only eighteen years old,² and a mistress who is fourscore;³ he loves his religion, and yet he cannot abide those who assert that it ought to be strictly observed;⁴ although he flies from the noise of cities, and is inclined to be reticent, from morning till night he is engaged in getting himself talked about; he is fond of trophies and victories, but he has as great a dread of seeing a good general at the head of his own troops, as at the head of an army of his enemies. It has never I believe

¹ When Louis XIV. was in his sixteenth year, some courtiers discussed in his presence the absolute power of the Sultans, who dispose as they like of the goods and the lives of their subjects. "That is something like being a king," said the young monarch. Marshal d'Estrées, alarmed at the tendency revealed in that remark, rejoined, "But, sire, several of these emperors have been strangled even in my time."

² Barbezieux, son of Louvois, Louis's youngest minister, held office at twenty-three, not eighteen; and he was dead in 1713.

³ Madame de Maintenon.

⁴ The Jansenists.

LETTER XXXVII

happened to any one but himself, to be burdened with more wealth than even a prince could hope for, and yet at the same time steeped in such poverty as a private person could ill brook.

He delights to reward those who serve him; but he pays as liberally the assiduous indolence of his courtiers, as the labours in the field of his captains; often the man who undresses him, or who hands him his serviette at table, is preferred before him who has taken cities and gained battles; he does not believe that the greatness of a monarch is compatible with restriction in the distribution of favours; and, without examining into the merit of a man, he will heap benefits upon him, believing that his selection makes the recipient worthy; accordingly, he has been known to bestow a small pension upon a man who had run off two leagues from the enemy, and a good government on another who had gone four.

Above all, he is magnificent in his buildings; there are more statues in his palace gardens¹ than there are citizens in a large town. His bodyguard is as strong as that

¹ At Versailles.

PERSIAN LETTERS

of the prince before whom all the thrones of the earth tremble;¹ his armies are as numerous, his resources as great, and his finances as inexhaustible.

Paris, the 7th of the moon of
Maharram, 1713.

LETTER XXXVIII

Rica to Ibben, at Smyrna

IT is an all-important question among men, whether it is better to deprive women of their liberty, or to leave them free. It seems to me that much is to be said on both sides. When Europeans declare that it is most ungenerous to keep those whom we love in misery, we Asiatics reply that men lower themselves by renouncing the dominion which nature has given them over women. If we are told how troublesome it must be to have a crowd of women shut up together, our reply is, that ten women who obey are less bother than one who does not. If we object, in our turn, that Europeans cannot be happy with women

¹ The Shah of Persia.

LETTER XXXVIII

who are unfaithful to them; they answer that the fidelity we boast of does not prevent that disgust, which always follows a surfeit of desire; that our women belong to us too absolutely; that possession obtained so easily leaves no scope for hope or fear; that a little coquetry, like salt, stimulates the appetite, and prevents corruption. Perhaps even a wiser man than I would find this question difficult to decide; for, if the Asiatics do well in seeking due means to quiet their uneasiness, the Europeans do equally well in not being uneasy.

After all, say they, though we should be unfortunate as husbands, we can always find compensation as lovers. A man could have just reason to complain of the infidelity of his wife only if there were no more than three people in the world; odd may be made even, as long as a fourth can be found.

Another much-discussed question is, whether women are intended by nature to be subject to men. "No," said a very gallant philosopher to me the other day; "nature never dictated such a law. The dominion which we exercise over them is

PERSIAN LETTERS

tyrannical; they yield themselves to men only because they are more tender-hearted, and consequently, more human and more rational. These advantages, which, had we been reasonable, would, without doubt, have given them the superiority, have been the cause of their subordination, because we are irrational.

“Now, if it is true that it is a tyrannical power which we have over women, it is none the less true that they exercise over us a natural dominion—that of beauty, which nothing can resist. Our power does not extend to all countries, but that of beauty is universal. Why, then, should we have any privilege? Is it because we are stronger than they? But that would be the height of injustice. We use every possible means to discourage them. Our powers would be found equal if we were educated alike. Try women in those gifts which education has not weakened, and we will soon see which is the abler sex.”

It must be admitted, although shocking to our ideas of propriety, that, among the most polite people, women have always borne sway over their husbands; their authority

LETTER XXXVIII

was established by law among the Egyptians in honour of Isis, and among the Babylonians in honour of Semiramis. It was said of the Romans that they, who ruled all the world, were ruled by their wives. I say nothing of the Sauromates,¹ who were held in a state of slavery by their women; they were too barbarous to be cited as an example.

You see, my dear Ibben, that I have fallen in with the fashion of this country, where they are fond of defending extraordinary opinions, and of reducing everything to a paradox. The prophet has decided this question, and has settled the rights of both sexes. "Women," he says, "ought to honour their husbands; and husbands, their wives: but men are a degree higher in the scale of creation than women."

Paris, the 26th of the second moon of
Gemmadi, 1713.

¹ Herodotus, iv. 110-147.

PERSIAN LETTERS

LETTER XXXIX

*Hagi¹ Ibbi to the Jew Ben Joshua, Mohammedan
Proselyte, at Smyrna*

IT seems to me, Ben Joshua, that prodigies always accompany the birth of extraordinary men, as if nature suffered a convulsion, and the celestial power could not bring forth without travail.

There is no birth so marvellous as that of Mohammed. God, who, by the decrees of His providence, had determined from the beginning to send to men that great prophet for the overthrow of Satan, created a light two thousand years before Adam, which, passing from elect to elect through the ancestors of Mohammed, reached him at last, as an authentic sign of his descent from the patriarchs.

It was because of this very prophet that God willed that no child should be conceived, that women should cease to be unclean, and that man should be circumcised.

¹ A Hagi is a man who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca.—(M.)

LETTER XXXIX

He came into the world circumcised already, and joy shone upon his face from his birth. The earth shook three times, as if she herself had brought forth; all the idols fell forward, and the thrones of kings were overturned. Lucifer was cast into the depths of the sea, and it was only after forty days' immersion that he swam up from the abyss, and took refuge on Mount Cabes, whence, with a terrible voice, he cried to the angels.

That night, God placed a barrier between the man and the woman, which neither of them could pass. The art of the magicians and of the necromancers cease to avail. A voice from heaven was heard crying, "I have sent into the world my faithful friend."

According to the testimony of Isben Aben, all the birds, the clouds, the winds, and the hosts of angels, met together to bring up this child, and disputed who should have the preference. The birds said in their warblings that it was proper for them to have his upbringing, because they could so easily gather a variety of fruits from many places. The winds

PERSIAN LETTERS

murmured and said, "To us rather he should be committed, because we can bear him from all quarters the sweetest odours." "No, no," cried the clouds; "no; it is we who should have charge of him, because we can refresh him at any moment with our showers." From on high the angels indignantly exclaimed, "What will there be left for us to do?" But a voice from heaven silenced their disputes and said, "He will not be withdrawn from mortal hands, because blessed shall be the breasts that suckle him, the hands that touch him, the house wherein he lives, and the bed on which he lies."

After so many striking testimonies, my dear Joshua, only a heart of iron could refuse to believe his holy law. What more could heaven itself have done to authorise his divine mission, unless it had overturned nature, and destroyed the very men whose salvation it desired.

Paris, the 20th of the moon of
Rhegeb, 1713.

LETTER XL

Usbek to Ibben, at Smyrna

WHEN a great man dies, people assemble in a mosque to hear his funeral oration pronounced—a discourse in his praise from which it would be very difficult to gather a true estimate of the deceased.

I would abolish all funeral pomp. Men should be bewailed at their birth and not at their death. What good purpose do these ceremonies serve, with all the doleful shows that are paraded before a dying man in his last moments: the very tears of his family and the grief of his friends exaggerate for him the loss he is about to sustain.

We are so blind that we know neither when to mourn, nor when to rejoice; our mirth and our sadness are nearly always false.

When I see the Great Mogul foolishly place himself once a year in a balance to be weighed like an ox; when I see his people applaud the increase in weight of their prince, that is to say, the decrease in his

PERSIAN LETTERS

capacity to govern them, my heart, Ibben, bleeds for the extravagance of humanity.

Paris, the 20th of the moon of
Rhegeb, 1713.

LETTER XLI

The chief black Eunuch to Usbek

ISHMAEL, one of your black eunuchs, O magnificent master, has just died; and I tried to avoid any delay in filling up his place. As eunuchs are very scarce at present, I thought of making use of a black slave whom you have in the country; but I have not yet succeeded in persuading him to undergo the sacrifice necessary for his consecration to that office. Knowing that this change would in the end work for his advantage, I wished the other day to employ towards him a little violence; and, in company with the superintendent of your gardens, I commanded that, in spite of himself, he should be put into a fit state to render you those services which most appeal to your heart, and to live with me in those sacred quarters, which, at present, he durst

LETTER XLII

not even look at ; but he fell a-roaring, as if we had wanted to slay him, and made such a to-do that he escaped from our hands, and so avoided the fatal knife. I have only now learned that he intends to write you begging for mercy, and that he will urge in his defence that this design has been conceived by me, only in satisfaction of a relentless desire to be avenged for some cutting sarcasms which he says he vented against me. However, I swear to you by the hundred thousand prophets, that in this matter I have acted entirely for the benefit of your service, the only thing which is dear to me, beyond which I have not a single thought. I prostrate myself at your feet.

The Seraglio at Palme, the 7th of the
moon of Maharram, 1713.

LETTER XLII

Pharan to Usbek, his Sovereign Lord

If you were here, magnificent lord, I would appear to you clad from head to foot in white paper ;¹ and even that would not be

¹ A "sublime expression" which the reader is *not* spared. (See Introduction.)

PERSIAN LETTERS

enough to contain a description of all the insults which your first black eunuch, the most malignant of men, has heaped upon me since your departure.

Under pretext of some sarcasms which he pretends I aimed at his unfortunate lot, he makes me the victim of an insatiable vengeance. He has stirred up against me the cruel superintendent of your gardens, who, ever since you left, has laid upon me impossible tasks, in attempting which I have a thousand times taken leave of life, although I never for an instant lost my ardour in your service. Many a time have I said to myself, "I who have the gentlest of masters, am yet the most miserable slave on the face of the earth!"

I confess, most generous lord, that I did not believe myself destined to still greater miseries; but this felonious cunuch had yet to fill up the measure of his wickedness. Some days ago, on his unsupported authority, he destined me to the guardianship of your sacred wives; that is to say, to a punishment which to me would be a thousand times more cruel than death. Those who, at their birth, have had the misfortune

LETTER XLIII

to undergo such treatment at the hands of their cruel parents, may perhaps comfort themselves with the thought that they have never known any other condition ; but were I to lose my place among men, and be deprived of that which makes me human, I should die of grief, if I survived the barbarous knife.

I kiss your feet, sublime lord, in the deepest humility. Grant that I may feel the effects of your revered virtue. Let it not be said that, at your command, there is upon the earth one more unhappy being.

The Gardens of Fatme, the 7th of the
moon of Maharram, 1713.

LETTER XLIII

Usbek to Pharan, at the Gardens of Fatme

REJOICE in your heart, and acknowledge these sacred characters. Let the chief eunuch and the superintendent of my gardens kiss this letter. I prohibit them from attempting anything against you : tell them to purchase the eunuch they require. Do your duty, as if you had me always before

PERSIAN LETTERS

you ; for know, that as my bounty is great, so, if you abuse it, will the measure of your punishment be.

Paris, the 25th of the moon of
Rhegeb, 1713.

LETTER XLIV

Usbek to Rhedi, at Venice

THERE are in France three privileged classes: the church, the sword, and the gown. Each has such a sovereign contempt for the other two, that sometimes a man who deserves to be looked down upon because he is a fool, is despised only because he is a lawyer.

All classes, including the meanest workmen, contend for the excellence of the craft they have chosen ; each man exalts himself at the expense of some other of a different profession, according to the idea which he has formed of the superiority of his own.

They all resemble, more or less, a certain woman of the province of Erivan, who, having received some favour from one of our monarchs, wished a thousand times,

LETTER XLIV

in the blessings she showered upon him, that Heaven would make him governor of Erivan.

I have read in a history, how some men belonging to the crew of a French vessel which had anchored off the coast of Guinea, went ashore in order to buy some sheep. They were led before the king, who was administering justice to his subjects under a tree. He sat upon his throne, that is to say, upon a block of wood, as proudly as if it had been the seat of the Great Mogul. His guard consisted of three or four men armed with pointed staves; an umbrella served as canopy to protect him from the heat of the sun; for ornaments, he and his consort wore nothing but their own black skins and some rings. This prince, whose vanity was greater even than his poverty, asked the strangers if they talked much of him in France. He imagined that his fame must have gone forth to the ends of the earth; and, unlike that conqueror of whom it is said that he had silenced all the earth, he for his part believed that he kept the whole world chattering.

When the Khan of Tartary has eaten, a

PERSIAN LETTERS

herald announces that all the princes of the earth may now go to dinner if they wish ; that barbarian, whose food is milk, who has no house, and who lives only by brigandage, looks upon all the kings of the world as his slaves, and insults them regularly twice a day.

Paris, the 28th of the moon of
Rhegeb, 1713.